

# A Synagogue for All Families Interfaith Inclusion in Conservative Synagogues





# Introduction

Across North America, Conservative *kehillot* (synagogues) create programs, policies, and welcoming statements to be inclusive of interfaith families and to model what it means for 21st century synagogues to serve 21 century families. While much work remains, many professionals and lay leaders in Conservative synagogues are leading the charge to ensure that their community reflects the prophet Isaiah's vision that God's house "shall be a house of prayer for all people" (56:7).

In order to share these congregational exemplars with other leaders who want to raise the bar for inclusion of interfaith families in Conservative Judaism, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ) and InterfaithFamily (IFF) collaborated to create this Interfaith Inclusion Resource for Conservative Synagogues. This is not an exhaustive list, but a starting point. This document highlights 10 examples where Conservative synagogues of varying sizes and locations model inclusivity in marketing, governance, pastoral counseling and other key areas of congregational life.

Our hope is that all congregations will be inspired to think as creatively as possible to embrace congregants where they are, and encourage meaningful engagement in the synagogue and the Jewish community. We are optimistic that this may help some synagogues that have not yet begun the essential work of the inclusion of interfaith families to find a starting point that works for them. Different synagogues may be in different places along the spectrum of welcoming and inclusion. Likewise, the examples presented here reflect a spectrum, from beginning steps to deeper levels of commitment, and may evolve as synagogues continue to engage their congregants in interfaith families.

Specific terminology is very important. Our recommendation is that the term "non-Jew" *not* be used as it describes someone in the negative. No one would choose to be described as a "non" anything! Better terms include someone: "of another faith," "from another faith background," "from another tradition," or even "not Jewish." Some of the examples in this document use the term non-Jew, and we hope that future revisions will improve upon the language. In all language used verbally, online or in printed materials, we encourage you to consider how your word choice makes members and prospective members feel included or excluded.

This will be an ongoing project, and we will update our resource as new examples emerge and the language and policies you are using continues to change. We hope that you feel inspired to not only use examples this resource contains, but also to create your own inclusion statements, policies, blessings, etc.

If there are other topics you would like to see included in future versions of this document, please let us know. If there is an area you're struggling with, please contact us for help, brainstorming and support.

For more information and to continue the discussion, please contact:

Rabbi Joshua Rabin, M. Ed.

Director of Innovation, USCJ (United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism)

Rabin@USCJ.org

646-519-9290

Stacie Garnett-Cook

National Director, InterfaithFamily/Your Community, InterfaithFamily

StacieG@InterfaithFamily.com

617-581-6862





# Thank You

We want to extend our appreciation to the following congregations featured in this first edition:

Anshe Emet Synagogue, Chicago, Illinois
Temple Aliyah, Woodland Hills, California
Congregation Ahavas Israel, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Temple Emanuel, Virginia Beach, Virginia
Temple Emunah, Lexington, Massachusetts
Congregation Brothers of Israel, Newtown, Pennsylvania
Congregation Ohev Shalom, Wallingford, Pennsylvania
Adas Israel Congregation, Washington D.C.
Congregation Beth Mordecai, Perth Amboy, New Jersey
Temple Emanuel, Newton, Massachusetts

**About** InterfaithFamily: We are here to help couples and families engage in Jewish life in ways that are personally meaningful through in-person support, online resources and connection to others in the community. We advocate for practices that are welcoming and inclusive of interfaith couples and families at Jewish organizations nationwide.

**About USCJ**: We strengthen kehillot (Jewish communities inside and outside the walls of a synagogue). We are the network that ensures there are thriving centers of Jewish practice across North America, Israel, and beyond that celebrate both tradition and contemporary life. Together, we demonstrate what an authentic and dynamic Judaism looks like, inspire people to be a part of it, and advance its critical role in the world.





#### **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 a 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 the 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.



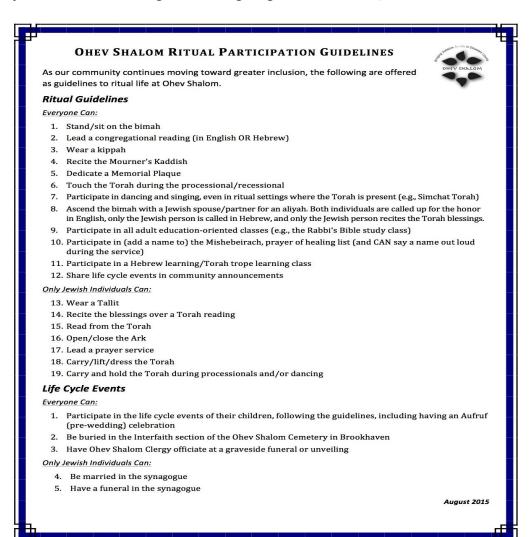






#### **Ritual Policy:**

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 <u>picture</u> to download original.







#### **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.







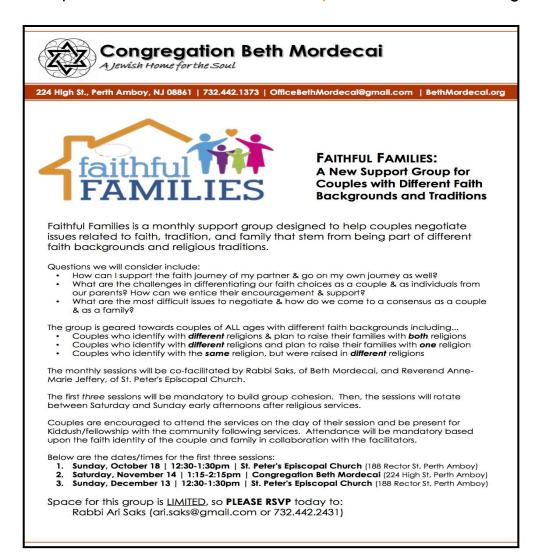






#### **Pastoral Counseling:**

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 <u>picture</u> to download original.







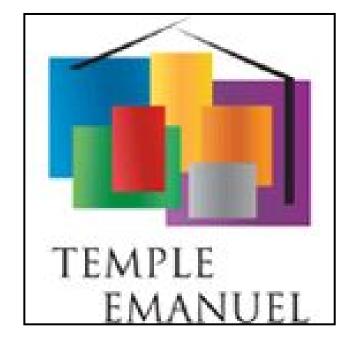
#### **Life Cycles and Weddings:**

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.
- 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)



