



A Synagogue for All Families

Interfaith Inclusion in Conservative Synagogues


Supporting Interfaith Families Exploring Jewish Life

 **USCJ** Seek meaning together

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:

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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 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 “Hanukat 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.

Hanukat 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:
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)**

