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A New Initiative

Conservative movement reaches out to intermarried families in a new way

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Shelli Liebman Dorfman

Staff Writer



Rabbi Krakoff

The United Synagogue of Conservative (USCJ) Judaism's convention last week was the venue for the presentation of a new outreach initiative by its executive vice president.

For too long, Rabbi Jerome Epstein said, the Conservative movement has, at best, "merely welcomed" intermarried families and often has rejected them.



Rabbi Miller

Instead, he said, Conservative congregations should work to bring the entire family into congregational life, encouraging the couple to raise Jewish children and inspire the non-Jewish spouses "to choose Judaism out of conviction that Jewish living will enrich their lives," as well as focusing on continued social and educational needs toward becoming a committed Jew.

Just weeks after the Union for Reform Judaism advocated openly suggesting the non-Jewish spouse convert, the Conservative movement's Rabbi Epstein said, "We must begin aggressively to encourage conversions of potential Jews who have chosen a Jewish spouse. And if conversion is initially rejected, we must continue to place it on the agenda," he said.

To bring children of mixed marriages into Jewish life, "special outreach" is needed to ensure their Jewish education, Rabbi Epstein said of a proposal of special scholarships and extra attention for children of intermarriage.

Having not yet received the proposal, which will be mailed to every Conservative professional and lay leader in North America, Rabbi Daniel Nevins of Adat Shalom Synagogue in Farmington Hills said, "I agree that we must be open to people exploring Judaism, and indeed, I spend quite a bit of time with non-Jews considering Judaism.

"Still, we must remain committed to the integrity of the conversion course, which insists that the convert is motivated by belief in the God of Israel and commitment to the mitzvot," he said. "The bar shouldn't be set so high that it discourages sincere converts, but it can't be set so low that we turn non-Jews into non-committal Jews."



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The outreach document — called al ha'derech, or “on the path”—isn't meant to dictate policy but rather suggest a way to guide what the movement is now calling “potential Jews” toward greater Jewish involvement. Therefore, some congregations and schools will include portions of the document in different ways in different situations.

Rabbi Jason Miller already is doing that. As rabbinic adviser for Beit Kodesh, Rabbi Miller, who is also assistant director of the University of Michigan Hillel in Ann Arbor, said: “I am proud that we are addressing the issues of intermarriage and making a concerted effort to welcome new members from areas like Novi, Northville, Canton and south Farmington to this small, but promising Conservative congregation in Livonia.

“We have realized that in order to be successful, it is imperative to welcome interfaith families as important members of our congregation,” he said. “In order for this synagogue to survive, I am fully prepared not to just say, ‘You're in,’ but to make a committed effort to reach out.”

While not at the convention, Rabbi Miller has been pursuing some of what was in the new initiative for several months at Beit Kodesh. “We need to include non-Jewish children in the Beit Kodesh religious school, with the hope of having them convert later on,” he said. “We may also include non-Jewish members in our service in more ways than some of the larger Conservative congregations, who are not recruiting as we are.

In the past few years at the Oakland County-based Congregation Shaarey Zedek, non-Jewish members have been integrated into synagogue life more than before.

“Our policy on including families with non-Jewish members is that they are members of our congregation,” said Rabbi Joseph Krakoff. “At Shaarey Zedek, they are welcomed as a family. Non-Jews are not able to participate on the board or to have a ritual honor, but if a non-Jewish family member wants to participate in a service, he or she may stand on the bimah with their family at a b'nai mitzvah. Non-Jews are also included in our services by being given non-liturgical readings to feel part of the celebration of the day.”

Rabbi Elliot Dorff, rector of the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, said, “A lot of our young people are intermarried, and we lose almost all of them.

“I'm not suggesting our rabbis do intermarriages, but we need to find more ways to make them welcome, so their children will be Jews and maybe down the road they'll convert,” he said.

Rabbi Dorff referred to the new initiative as “a focus, indicating where we'll spend our time and energy.

“We should have been doing this 10 years ago,” he said.

Sue Fishkoff of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency contributed to this story.

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