

## Report on InterfaithFamily's 2017 Survey on Rabbinic Officiation for Interfaith Couples

### Summary Findings

Between August and October 2017, InterfaithFamily (IFF) conducted an Officiation Survey of rabbis about their practices around officiation at weddings of interfaith couples. A total of 881 qualified responses were received, the largest number of responses ever by rabbis to a survey about officiation practices, including 500 members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), or 23% of its members, and 149 members of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, or 44% of its members.

Of CCAR and RRA members who responded, 85% said they officiate at weddings of interfaith couples, under some or all conditions. Depending on how “co-officiation” is defined, as many as 45% “co-officiate:” 25% answered affirmatively that they “co-officiate” with clergy from other faiths, while another 20% said that they do not “co-officiate” but do permit clergy from other faiths to offer prayers or readings that contain no theological references to religions other than Judaism.

These results represent large increases from the last reported survey of CCAR and RRA members in 1995, which found that 47% of respondents would officiate, and 13% would co-officiate.

Additional findings concerning CCAR/RRA respondents include:

- Almost the same percentage of women (85%) and men (83%) officiate, but slightly more men (27%) than women (20%) co-officiate.
- More recently ordained rabbis tend to officiate: of rabbis ordained after 2010, 93% officiate, compared to 85% of those ordained after 2000, and 83% of those ordained before 2000. But more rabbis ordained before 2000 co-officiate (27%) than those ordained after 2000 and after 2010 (23% each).
- A clear majority of rabbis who officiate for interfaith couples (59%) require a commitment to establish a Jewish home and/or raise children as Jews as a condition of officiating.
- A quarter of rabbis who officiate (26%) require a course of study in Judaism before the wedding, 7% a commitment to pursue a course of study after the wedding.
- Almost a quarter of rabbis who officiate (22%) require the partner from a different or no tradition to not be committed to another faith; 13% require such partners to be open to conversion; 2% require them to begin the conversion process with intent to complete conversion after the wedding.
- Almost half of rabbis (47%) will offer prayers or readings or blessings after or at the conclusion of a service performed by clergy from another faith.
- A clear majority of rabbis (59%) officiate before sundown on Shabbat; 41% do not.

- Two-thirds of rabbis who specified the price they charged to officiate said \$500 to \$1000; 25% said \$1000 to \$1500; 8% said less than \$500, 4% said \$1500 to \$2000.
- A little more than two-thirds (69%) said their premarital counseling practices are not different for interfaith couples than for other couples; 31% said they are, with a common comment being the addition of a “session focusing on interfaith issues in their relationship and family life.”
- Almost one fifth (18%) said that they meet with groups of interfaith couples for whom they are officiating or co-officiating to discuss issues arising from their interfaith relationships; 82% do not.

The survey asked a number of open-ended questions inviting rabbis to explain their positions, eliciting hundreds of comments that offer insight into diverse rabbinic views on officiation and co-officiation. Representative quotations from actual survey comments are included in the report.

Issues around officiation and co-officiation continue to be important to rabbis – 34% of CCAR/RRA respondents said they would be interested in participating in clergy-only conversations led by InterfaithFamily to discuss topics related to officiation and co-officiation for interfaith couples.

## Survey Report

### Introduction

Between August and October 2017, InterfaithFamily (IFF) conducted an Officiation Survey of rabbis about their practices around officiation at weddings of interfaith couples. The survey was publicized in various email newsletters, emails, and social media posts.<sup>1</sup> This report<sup>2</sup> presents the findings of the survey.

A total of 881 qualified responses were received. To our knowledge, this is the largest number of responses ever by rabbis to a survey about officiation practices. In particular, 500 members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) responded, representing 23% of its 2,200 members; 149 members of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, representing 44% of its membership, responded. There were also 64 responses from members of OHALAH, 59 from members of the Rabbinical Assembly, 19 from members of the Association for the Academy of Jewish Religion NY, 16 from members of the Academy for Jewish Religion CA Clergy and Alumni Association, and 8 from members of the Association of Humanistic Rabbis.

This report primarily focuses on data from members of the CCAR and RRA, in part to compare the results of this survey with past surveys. Select information about responses from other rabbis is included; IFF would be pleased to respond to inquiries about the data related to rabbis with other affiliations.

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<sup>1</sup> IFF thanks Rabbi Elyse Wechterman, executive director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA), for bringing the survey to the attention of its members several times.

<sup>2</sup> IFF thanks Edmund Case, its retired founder, for his work as a consultant analyzing the data and drafting this report.

## Key Findings

A major purpose of this survey was to ascertain the percentages of rabbis who officiate at weddings of interfaith couples, and who “co-officiate” with clergy from other faiths. Estimates that “about half” of Reform rabbis officiated were common, without citation of supporting information; the last reported survey was conducted by the Resource Center for Research and Counseling (RCRC) in 1995, which had also conducted surveys of CCAR and then RRA members in 1982, 1986, and 1990.

By way of introduction, the definition of “co-officiate” is ambiguous. The first survey question about co-officiation asked whether respondents co-officiate or do not co-officiate, with co-officiation described in the question as “officiation at intermarriages where clergy from other faiths participate in some role.” The second survey question about co-officiation asked about certain conditions under which rabbis would co-officiate as so described. Two of the conditions refer to “sharing” a service with other clergy (one with and one without theological references to religions other than Judaism, which we understand typically means mentioning or not mentioning Jesus). One of the conditions refer to the rabbi being the only officiant, but clergy from other faiths offering prayers or readings that contained theological reference to religions other than Judaism.

However, in the survey question about the conditions under which rabbis would officiate – not co-officiate – for interfaith couples, one condition refers to the rabbi being the only officiant but clergy from other faiths offering prayers or readings that contain no theological references to religions other than Judaism.

A significant number of CCAR and RRA member respondents who answered the co-officiation questions affirmatively said that they do not co-officiate, but answered the conditions of officiation question by saying they permit clergy from other faiths to offer prayers or readings without theological references to other religions. These responses indicate that at least those rabbis do not consider allowing participation by other clergy to that extent to constitute “co-officiation.” There were a number of responses to the open-ended question that asked rabbis to explain their reasons for deciding about officiation like the following: “To me, someone offering a reading (whether clergy or not) is not officiating.”

The key findings of the survey, then, include the percentages of CCAR and RRA rabbis who say with respect to weddings of interfaith couples that they officiate (85%) or do not officiate (15%), who say they co-officiate (25%) or do not co-officiate (75%), and who say they do not co-officiate but do permit clergy from other faiths to offer prayers or readings that contain no theological references to religions other than Judaism (20%). (The latter are referred to in the tables as “allow some participation by other clergy”). Thus depending on how “co-officiation” is defined, as many as 45% of CCAR and RRA member respondents “co-officiate;” that is the percentage of respondents who allow participation in some role by clergy from other faiths.

The key findings are summarized in Table 1<sup>3</sup>:

	CCAR		RRA		CCAR and RRA	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Say they do not officiate	79	16%	18	12%	95	15%
Say they officiate	411	84%	128	88%	522	85%
Say they do not co-officiate	346	74%	113	78%	445	75%
Say they do not co-officiate, but allow some participation by other clergy	85	17%	39	27%	123	20%
Say they co-officiate	120	26%	31	22%	146	25%

These results represent large increases from the RCRC’s last reported survey of CCAR and RRA members in 1995, which found that 47% of respondents would officiate and 13% would “participate with non-Jewish clergy.” Table 2 compares the results of the 2017 survey to the results of the RCRC’s surveys as reported in 1995:

	1982	1986	1990	1990	1990	1995	1995	1995	2017	2017	2017
	CCAR	CCAR	CCAR	RRA	CCAR/ RRA	CCAR	RRA	CCAR/ RRA	CCAR	RRA	CCAR/ RRA
	#/%	#/%	#/%	#/%	#/%	#/%	#/%	#/%	#/%	#/%	#/%
# of respondents	582	552	729	65	798	659	63	710	500	149	630
Officiate	293	278	335	23	355	318	24	334	411	128	522
Participate with clergy from other faith (% of respondents)	50%	50%	46%	34%	44%	48%	38%	47%	84%	88%	85%
			103	5	106	86	7	90			
Say they co-officiate	19%	16%	14%	8%	13%	13%	11%	13%	120	31	146
									26%	22%	25%
Say they do not co-officiate, but allow some participation by other clergy									85	39	123
									17%	27%	20%

Summary reports on the RCRC’s 1990 and 1995 surveys, which also contain data from 1982 and 1986, can be found at <http://rcrconline.org/research.htm>.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The combined CCAR and RRA numbers do not tie with the individual CCAR and RRA numbers because 19 rabbis were members of both the CCAR and RRA. 490 CCAR and 146 RRA members responded to the question about officiation, 466 and 144 to the question about co-officiation, and 428 and 131 to the question about requiring commitment; taken together, 617 responded about officiation, 591 about co-officiation, and 542 about commitment.

<sup>4</sup> The combined CCAR and RRA numbers in the RCRC reports do not tie with the individual CCAR and RRA numbers because some respondents were members of both associations. The RCRC reports note that in 1995, a questionnaire was mailed to 1,651 CCAR members (we understand that the CCAR provided a mailing list of its members to the RCRC) and 167 RRA members, and there were 710 respondents, or 40%; in 1990, questionnaires were mailed to 1,554 CCAR members and 152 RRA members, and there were 798 responses, or 48%. We understand that surveys were fielded by the RCRC in 2006 and in 2012, but to our knowledge reports are not available.

In the table, percentages for the 2017 survey are to numbers of responses to particular questions, not number of respondents overall.

We are not able to directly compare the RCRC surveys and the 2017 survey with respect to “co-officiation,” because the 1995 RCRC report refers only to respondents who said they “participate with non-Jewish clergy.”



## Detailed Findings

### Officiation and Co-officiation by Association/Ordination

Table 3 details the responses to the officiation and co-officiation questions by CCAR members, RRA members, CCAR and RRA members together, Rabbinical Assembly (RA) members, and other survey respondents. We did not find what we consider to be significant differences in officiation practices between CCAR and RRA members. We understand that the RRA does not allow its members to co-officiate, but 22% of the RRA respondents, representing 31 individuals, said they did so, and another 27%, representing 39 individuals, said they allow some participation by other clergy.

Table 3 - Officiation and Co-officiation by Association/Other	CCAR		RRA		CCAR/RRA		RA		Other Seminaries		Other	
	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#
<b>Which of the following most closely describes your practice regarding officiation at intermarriages?</b>												
Do not officiate under any circumstances and do not refer to rabbis who do.	2%	10	1%	1	2%	11	18%	10	2%	2	1%	1
Do not officiate under any circumstances but refer to rabbis who do.	14%	69	12%	17	14%	84	68%	38	11%	11	6%	5
Officiate under certain circumstances.	73%	360	75%	110	74%	455	11%	6	67%	68	46%	38
Officiate under all circumstances.	10%	51	12%	18	11%	67	4%	2	21%	21	47%	39
<b>Total</b>		490		146		617		56		102		83
<b>Which of the following most closely describes your practice regarding officiation at intermarriages where clergy from other faiths participate in some role ("co-officiation")?</b>												
Do not co-officiate under any circumstances and do not refer to rabbis who do.	27%	126	30%	43	27%	161	40%	17	14%	14	11%	9
Do not co-officiate under any circumstances but refer to rabbis who do.	47%	220	49%	70	48%	284	52%	22	34%	34	15%	12
Co-officiate under certain circumstances.	21%	96	19%	27	20%	120	2%	1	43%	43	35%	28
Co-officiate under all circumstances.	5%	24	3%	4	4%	26	5%	2	9%	9	39%	31
<b>Total</b>		466		144		591		42		100		80

Fifty-nine members of the Conservative movement’s Rabbinical Assembly (RA) responded to the survey. The RA does not permit its members to officiate for interfaith couples and has recently expelled a prominent Conservative rabbi who starting doing so. Eight RA member respondents reported that they officiate and 3 that they co-officiate.

For ease of reference and with no other categorization intended, Table 3 also includes data on officiation and co-officiation by respondents who reported they were ordained by “other seminaries” – not by American Jewish University, Hebrew Union College, Jewish Theological Seminary, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Yeshiva University or Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, but rather by the Academy for Jewish Religion NY, Academy for Jewish Religion CA, Aleph Rabbinic Program, Hebrew College, Hebrew Seminary for the Deaf, and the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism – as well as a separate category of respondents who responded “other” to the question of their ordination (not ordained by any of previously mentioned seminaries, mainly privately). The rate of officiation of those ordained by “other seminaries” (88%) was not significantly different than the rate of CCAR/RRA members; the rate of those whose ordination was “other” (93%) was the highest of the other groups. The rates of co-officiation of those ordained by “other seminaries” (52%) and of those whose ordination was “other” (84%) were significantly higher than that of CCAR/RRA members.

### Officiation and Co-officiation by Gender and Years of Practice

Table 4 details officiation and co-officiation responses by gender of CCAR/RRA members. Fifty-one percent of respondents were male, 47% female, and 2% other (non-binary/third gender,

prefer not to say, prefer to self-describe other ways). We did not find any significant differences in rates of officiation between women (85%) and men (83%). We did find more women than men did not co-officiate (80% vs. 72%) and correspondingly more men than women did co-officiate (27% vs. 20%).

Which of the following most closely describes your practice regarding officiation at intermarriages?	Male		Female		Other	
	%	#	%	#	%	#
Do not officiate under any circumstances and do not refer to rabbis who do.	2%	7	1%	3	10%	1
Do not officiate under any circumstances but refer to rabbis who do.	14%	44	14%	40		
Officiate under certain circumstances.	72%	229	75%	218	70%	7
Officiate under all circumstances.	11%	36	10%	29	20%	2
<b>Total</b>		<b>316</b>		<b>290</b>		<b>10</b>
Which of the following most closely describes your practice regarding officiation at intermarriages where clergy from other faiths participate in some role ("co-officiation")?						
Do not co-officiate under any circumstances and do not refer to rabbis who do.	28%	85	27%	74	10%	1
Do not co-officiate under any circumstances but refer to rabbis who do.	44%	135	53%	145	40%	4
Co-officiate under certain circumstances.	22%	68	17%	48	40%	4
Co-officiate under all circumstances.	5%	16	3%	9	10%	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>304</b>		<b>276</b>		<b>10</b>

Table 5 details officiation and co-officiation rates by years from ordination. We compared rabbis who were ordained before 2000, ordained after 2000, and separately, after 2010. We found that of rabbis ordained before 2000, 18% did not officiate, compared to 11% of those ordained after 2000, and 8% of those ordained after 2010, suggesting a trend for newer rabbis to officiate. However, 27% of the rabbis ordained before 2000 co-officiate, compared to 23% of those ordained after 2000 and after 2010.

Which of the following most closely describes your practice regarding officiation at intermarriages?	Ordained > 2010		Ordained > 2000		Ordained < 2000	
	%	#	%	#	%	#
Do not officiate under any circumstances and do not refer to rabbis who do.	1%	1	1%	5	2%	6
Do not officiate under any circumstances but refer to rabbis who do.	7%	12	10%	34	18%	50
Officiate under certain circumstances.	84%	137	78%	260	69%	194
Officiate under all circumstances.	9%	14	11%	36	11%	31
<b>Total</b>		<b>164</b>		<b>335</b>		<b>281</b>
Which of the following most closely describes your practice regarding officiation at intermarriages where clergy from other faiths participate in some role ("co-officiation")?						
Do not co-officiate under any circumstances and do not refer to rabbis who do.	18%	29	23%	74	32%	86
Do not co-officiate under any circumstances but refer to rabbis who do.	58%	94	54%	176	40%	108
Co-officiate under certain circumstances.	22%	36	20%	63	21%	57
Co-officiate under all circumstances.	1%	2	3%	10	6%	16
<b>Total</b>		<b>161</b>		<b>323</b>		<b>267</b>

## Conditions for Officiation

Table 6 summarizes the responses of CCAR and RRA members to a question about the conditions under which they officiate. A key finding of the survey is that 59% of CCAR and RRA members taken together (61% of CCAR and 53% of RRA member respondents) require, as a condition of officiation, a commitment to a Jewish home/to raise Jewish children. This compares to 43% in the 1995 RCRC survey who said they required commitment to a Jewish home/Jewish children as a condition of officiating.

<b>Table 6 Conditions for Officiation</b>		
<b>Under which of the following conditions will you officiate at intermarriages? Please check all that apply.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>#</b>
Require partner from different or no faith tradition to begin conversion process with intent to complete conversion after the wedding.	2%	11
Require partner from different or no faith tradition to be open to considering conversion.	13%	68
Require partner from different or no faith tradition to not be committed to another faith.	22%	121
Require commitment to establish a Jewish home and/or raise children as Jews.	59%	322
Require that children not be promised to another faith.	43%	232
Require course of study in Judaism prior to wedding.	26%	139
Require commitment to pursue course of study in Judaism after the wedding.	7%	36
Jewish partner or partner's family must be members of synagogue where I work.	8%	46
Require synagogue membership.	9%	47
Requirements set with each couple during premarital counseling.	43%	231
Require Jewish ceremony to be the only religious ceremony.	60%	325
Require rabbi to be the only officiant with no participation by clergy from other faith.	54%	290
Require rabbi to be the only officiant but permit clergy from other faith to offer prayers or readings or blessings that contain no theological references to religions other than Judaism.	34%	186
Other (please specify)	21%	112

Twenty-six percent of CCAR/RRA respondents require a course of study in Judaism before the wedding; 7% require a commitment to pursue such a course of study after the wedding.

Two percent of CCAR/RRA respondents require the partner from a different or no faith tradition to begin the conversion process with intent to complete conversion after the wedding; 13% require such partners to be open to considering conversion; 22% requires such partners to not be committed to another faith.

### Conditions for Co-officiation

Table 7 summarizes the responses of CCAR and RRA members to a question about the conditions under which they co-officiate. Twenty percent will share with clergy from another faith a service that does contain theological references to religions other than Judaism; 31% will share a service that does not contain such references. Forty-nine percent require the rabbi to be the only officiant, but permit clergy from other another faith to offer prayers or readings that do contain theological references to religions other than Judaism.

<b>Table 7 Conditions for Co-officiation</b>		
<b>Under which of the following conditions will you co-officiate at intermarriages? Please check all that apply.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>#</b>
Require rabbi to be the only officiant but permit clergy from other faith to offer prayers or readings that contain theological references to religions other than Judaism.	49%	131
Share with clergy from other faith a service that contains no theological references to religions other than Judaism.	31%	85
Share with clergy from other faith a service that contains theological references to religions other than Judaism.	20%	53
Officiate in a church or chapel where Christian symbols are visible.	15%	41
Officiate in another house of worship where religious symbols of another religion are visible.	17%	47
Offer prayers or readings or blessings after or at conclusion of service performed by clergy from other faith.	47%	126

Seventeen percent of CCAR/RRA respondents will officiate in another house of worship where religious symbols of another religion are visible.

Forty-seven percent of CCAR/RRA respondents will offer prayers or readings or blessings after or at the conclusion of a service performed by clergy from another faith.

### **Officiation on Shabbat**

Fifty-nine percent of CCAR/RRA respondents officiate before sundown on Shabbat; 41% do not. Many respondents who answered an open-ended question about this practice said they would officiate at 6 pm on Shabbat; some said 5 pm, some 7 pm, many said “as close to sundown as possible.” Some representative comments:

In my Reform congregation, we hold havdalah ceremonies at 5:30 year-round. According to our community, that's when Shabbat ends. I will not officiate at a wedding that begins before 6:00 on Saturday night.

I consider Shabbat over in the "evening," and I believe most people would agree that around 6:00pm is evening, regardless of season.

Where I live, over the summer sundown can be as late as 9pm at night. So I will do a late afternoon or early evening service as close to sundown as the couple is willing to go.

I will officiate in the "spirit" of sundown on Shabbat. This means, that while I don't care what time the sun actually sets, the ceremony should be set for an evening time (5pm onwards). If a Shabbat wedding is occurring on the earlier side of sundown, I will encourage the couple to include a havdalah ceremony as part of the wedding.



I am more interested in couples hearing YES, we accept you rather than what they perceive to be rigid rules that they cannot fathom.

I will officiate at the end of Shabbat, in the late afternoon. I have come to realize that in most settings, I am the only one who is observing Shabbat. When a couple asks me to officiate at, say, 5 pm for a wedding I tell them that I charge a premium fee to come out of my vacation time early to attend to their wedding. Most couples prefer to pay this premium....

### **Charges for Officiation**

In response to a question what they charge to officiate or co-officiate at a wedding, not including travel time or travel expenses if any, 8% of CCAR/RRA members who specified a price said less than \$500, 64% said \$500 to \$1000, 25% said \$1000 to \$1500, 4% said \$1500 to \$2000. Twenty-eight percent said “other” with explanations: some ask for contributions; some only officiate for synagogue members who have to pay dues to join; some only officiate for members but offer free membership.

### **Premarital Counseling Practices**

Sixty-nine percent of CCAR/RRA respondents said their premarital counseling practices are not different for interfaith couples than for other couples; 31% said they are. A common comment in the open-ended responses was the addition of a “session focusing on interfaith issues in their relationship and family life.”

We spend a good deal of time discussing “yours, mine and ours” to understand that not all religions are the same and to discuss what each individual carries with them into their relationship in terms of their own needs and wants as well as where they need to compromise for the sake of the relationship.

We discuss in more depth what it means to have a Jewish home and raise Jewish children.

Interfaith marriages, even if they choose to have a Jewish home, requires additional sensitivity to the choices they will constantly need to make as each holiday and lifecycle comes around. That, and attention to their motivation and any concerns/conflicts with family of origin. That’s true for both sides of the couple.

I have an additional meeting to provide space for the couple to explore how they will integrate Jewish practice into their home life and honor the other faith tradition(s) in the family. I have thought about adding this session for all of my couples.

A few rabbis commented that they encourage interfaith couples to meet with a clergy member from the other faith.

Eighteen percent of CCAR/RRA respondents said that they meet with groups of interfaith couples for whom they are officiating or co-officiating to discuss issues arising from their interfaith relationships; 82% do not.

### **The Rabbis Speak**

The survey asked a number of open-ended questions inviting rabbis to explain their positions, eliciting hundreds of comments that offer insight into diverse rabbinic views on officiation and co-officiation. The following quotations of actual survey comments are meant to be representative of that broad range of views. These issues continue to be important to rabbis – 34% of CCAR/RRA respondents said they would be interested in participating in clergy-only conversations led by InterfaithFamily to discuss topics related to officiation and co-officiation for interfaith couples.

#### **Reasons for not officiating**

The most common explanation for not officiating referred to inconsistency with Jewish law, tradition, and the role of the rabbi. For example: “I have been given the honor and responsibility of acting as *mesaderet kiddushin* under the chuppah for two Jews who are creating a Jewish home.” A few referred to “rules” including the official CCAR resolution – one said the CCAR “is on record as opposing interfaith weddings” – and their senior rabbi not permitting them to officiate.

There were a few comments along the lines of “I still do not see [officiation] as a good thing for Jewish continuity.” A few said they thought it wasn’t right to extract promises that set interfaith couples up for later struggle, for example: “I do not believe in creating situations that cause people to promise things they cannot know yet, i.e. raising children Jewish or having a Jewish home.” Others referred to interfaith marriage itself as a struggle or not a good thing: “I’ve seen couples struggle later in life with how to raise their children, how to keep personal integrity and keep peace at home and I don’t want to set couples up for this struggle.” “I do not believe, based on personal experience, that [interfaith families] are good for children or adults.”

A few rabbis who do not officiate indicated they were struggling with their position. “Though I believe it is the wise thing to do with a conservative approach, I cannot bring myself to do it.” “I feel terrible about pushing away couples who might have a lovely Jewish life together.” “I know that rationally, it makes sense for me... yet I have still not been able to get past some of my visceral reaction to it.”

#### **Reasons for officiating**

Only a few comments by those who officiate addressed the consistency with Jewish law and tradition argument. One said,

In the exchange of rings, I interpret *k'dat Moshe v'Yisrael* to mean, "according to the traditions of Moses and the Jewish people." As our traditions are wide and varied and I



do not require kashrut or being shomer Shabbat or other religious restrictions, I did not feel that I could require the people for whom I am officiating all be Jewish, either, especially since there are many interfaith families in my community who are living Jewish lives according to the traditions of Moses and the Jewish people. That being said, I also took seriously my role as *mesader kiddushin* and will only officiate at ceremonies that are exclusively Jewish.

One comment was that not officiating would not deter other couples from intermarrying – “I don't believe that sending couples away will ... deter other interfaith couples” and, more importantly, would not “encourage the couple in question to pursue Judaism in their married lives.”

One comment expressed concern about “illegitimate” rabbis: “I feel that if they are going to be married by a rabbi that they might as well have a good one. I have a criteria but if they want a rabbi, I want to make sure it is a legitimate one.”

Most of the many comments by those who officiate expressed the belief that officiation would lead to more Jewish homes, families and children, and focused on four points: that so many interfaith families are Jewishly engaged, that welcoming has positive consequences, that rejection has negative consequences, and that not officiating is inconsistent with welcoming couples after the wedding.

## 1. Experience with interfaith couples

Many rabbis said their decisions were influenced by their experience with interfaith couples creating Jewish homes and families:

I changed my position 5 years into my rabbinate because I saw so many interfaith couples who create loving Jewish homes and families.

A mixed couple convinced me that a) two Jews do not guarantee a Jewish home, and b) with their positive attitudes towards Jewish practice, they looked forward to establishing a Jewish home.

[I]t's hard to find your bashert - I know so many Jews who always imagined themselves marrying Jews, but then the person they fell in love with, sometimes after a long period of being single, was not Jewish. And so many times, the story is that that person is more making Judaism a bigger part of their life together than the Jewish ex was.

For the first twenty five years of my rabbinate I did not officiate. Then, through my work at my congregation, I met many interfaith couples who were in fact raising Jewish children and who had created a Jewish family. Many were in our [schools]. I realized then that my job as a rabbi was not to make Jewish marriages but to facilitate the creation of Jewish families. I believe that officiation, with serious premarital counseling, can make that happen.

Thirty-six years as senior rabbi in two synagogues has demonstrated to me that interfaith couples raising Jewish children are as committed to Judaism, if not more so, than Jewish-Jewish couples.

Too many interfaith families I've met sustain Jewish practice and identity. Too many Jewish couples are apathetic. For so long I refused to officiate for the former and didn't hesitate to officiate for the latter. Feels hypocritical to me. Now I require similar study requirements for all couples I help.

I'm an advocate for the creation of Jewish families. Over the years, I've learned that in marriages where only one partner is formally Jewish it is still very possible to create a wonderful family imbued with Jewish love, commitment and integrity.

I feel we gain more by officiating than we do if we refuse. I serve a congregation bursting at the seams with Jewish children. The interfaith rate is over 60%.

Our congregation is 80 percent interfaith families who are committed to raising their kids as Jews. I know how important it is to officiate at a Jewish ceremony for interfaith couples to welcome them with open arms into Judaism.

## **2. Welcoming has positive consequences**

Many rabbis focused on officiation as a way to be welcoming, at a critical time, with positive consequences. Several responses were short and to the point: "I want to open doors not shut them." "You get more by saying yes than by saying no." "We gain more by offering a path in than by appearing to push them away." "I want to be the mezuzah offering blessings for Jewish engagement for Jews and those who love them." Many referred to officiating as increasing the chances for Jewish engagement:

The best way to open the door to an interfaith couple keeping a Jewish home, raising any children they might have as Jewish children, and finding their place in the Jewish community is doing just that -- opening the door to them.

Best way to help interfaith couples establish relationship to Judaism. You're either in the conversation or you're not.

I believe that my officiation is seen as a sign of welcome for the non-Jewish spouse which increases the chance that he/she will be willing to live happily in a Jewish family/home.

Recent research shows a positive correlation between having a rabbi or cantor officiate at an interfaith wedding and a couple's subsequent decision to raise Jewish children.

I want to be as welcoming as possible to couples as they begin their life together. Sharing a meaningful, personal ceremony is an investment for possible future involvement in the Jewish community, creating a Jewish home, raising Jewish children, etc.

I am interested in creating more families that are connected and committed to Judaism, the Jewish community and raising Jewish children. In my experience the more we open our tent to include those who are dedicated to respecting, learning about and even engaging in Judaism, regardless of the faith background, the stronger we are as a community... It has also been my experience that both partners become more deeply connected to Judaism through the process of planning a wedding and exploring questions of religious identity with me.

[W]eddings are a great time to reintroduce Judaism to people in a meaningful way that might move them to become more engaged in Judaism in their life.

Couples who want to have Jewish ceremonies invite us to help them deepen their relationship with Judaism. I can't say 'No,' but rather see this as a wonderful opportunity to fan the spark and grow the connection."

If it is important to them that there be a Jewish presence at the beginning of their life together, then I want to make sure that I can provide a positive Jewish experience that will encourage them to be a part of the Jewish community.

Some comments emphasized the impact that a rabbi's involvement can have at the wedding and afterwards: "One cannot underestimate the power of a rabbi's blessing and the ongoing relationship which is possible from there!" "Being there for a couple when they marry means that I might get to be there down the road too as they grow together."

Some rabbis mentioned later conversion as a potential consequence of officiating:

I hold open to both partners the option of studying further with me to deepen their spiritual connection with Judaism, and offer the option of officially "joining the Jewish people" to the non-Jewish partner as a powerful step on the path of affirming the commitment to a Jewish family life. I have worked with many who have chosen to take this step in the course of our study together.

I do have an impressive 'record' of non-Jews who have converted after the marriage.

Some comments mentioned other consequences of officiating: "I want to be a part of life cycle events for children who grew up in my congregation, ... and want to promote the idea that Reform Judaism is a welcoming place for their interfaith family to take root." "I officiate because anyone who wants access to Jewish spiritual traditions should have access." "I hope that the process of planning the wedding will provide an opening for them to experience how Judaism can enrich their lives and family, but in any case, to accompany them with kindness at this important juncture in their lives. "I figure that whether or not a partner converts, I've just

helped one more person (and maybe their extended families and surely any future children) become lovers of the Jewish people.”

### 3. Rejection has negative consequences

Many rabbis focused on the negative consequences of not officiating on the likely future engagement of the couple.

I believe strongly that providing a positive and meaningful Jewish wedding ceremony for a couple who is interested in having one can only lead to a higher possibility that the couple will end up creating a Jewish home and/or raising Jewish children in the future. Refusing to do so, regardless the reasons, only makes it less likely.

I also firmly believe that couples who have a positive experience with a rabbi at their wedding are more likely to engage later, while those couples who are told no or who are made to feel like they are not welcome, will likely never engage again.

[H]aving an affirming and positive experience of Jewish authority opens doors and sometimes undoes damage that has been done or would be done by rejection. It does not always have that effect, but I think the net effect on people's experience of Jewish culture and community is a positive one.

Some spoke of closing doors: “I want couples to understand that Judaism is an open and welcoming place, and by opening that door for them, that is one less barrier to becoming part of the Jewish community. Saying an outright ‘no’ more often than not slams the door shut.”

Some spoke of “losing” couples and their future children: “I believe rabbis that turn away couples pose the risk of losing them entirely.” “I want them to feel embraced by the Jewish community and I think that having a rabbi perform their wedding is a first step in this. I think that if we turn interfaith couples away we stand to lose the next generation of (potentially) Jewish children.”

Some spoke of alienating couples and the Jewish partners: “When a rabbi is involved there is a connection to Jewish heritage. If [a rabbi] refuse[s] to participate [the] couple will marry with only negative feelings toward Jewish religion.” “I’ve found that if a rabbi rejects a person's fiancé, it can cause irreparable damage to that person's relationship with their Jewish life. Or they'll just find another rabbi to do it, and forever resent the rabbi who rejected them.” Some addressed rejection by a rabbi with whom the Jewish partner had grown up: ““I am also sure that turning people away will alienate them from Judaism. Even if they find a rabbi, they were turned away by ‘their’ rabbi.” Some said the negative feelings were long-lasting: “I ... heard lots of stories in doing outreach to interfaith couples about their memories of harsh and hurtful things some rabbis had told them when asked to officiate.”

Some suggested that negative consequences were unavoidable, no matter how the rabbi's position was explained: “[E]ven when done kindly and compassionately, telling a couple that I

cannot officiate their wedding puts a wedge between them and Judaism.” “They should receive a positive response from the Jewish community, not a negative one that feels to the couple to be judging them.” Some spoke from personal experience: “I saw the pain my older brother experienced trying to get married. He had two ceremonies--one [another faith] one Jewish--and was turned down by many rabbis. As a result, he is not involved in organizational Jewish life.”

#### **4. Not officiating inconsistent with later welcoming**

Some rabbis said that not officiating is inconsistent with welcoming interfaith couples after their weddings:

I am committed to the creation of Jewish grandchildren. Were I not to offer "Judaism" to the marriage, the non-Jew, when blessed with children could say, "when we married a rabbi would not accept us and now you are insisting that our children be Jewish when at our marriage we could not"?

[I]t seems hypocritical to me to welcome in interfaith families, and yet not marry them.

I felt that it was disingenuous to welcome couples into the community after the wedding but not be part of the wedding. That is when I began to officiate.

I want to welcome the children of these families so I cannot understand why I would not bless their unions.

I think that not officiating when only Judaism is part of the wedding ceremony sends a negative message about my willingness to include this family in our synagogue and Jewish community.

#### **Requiring a commitment to Jewish home/Jewish children**

Almost 60% of rabbis who officiate require a commitment to a Jewish home/to raise children as if doing so is consistent with their role to help create Jewish homes and Jewish children:

I am both clergy for the couple and a leader of the Jewish people. I must simultaneously serve both commitments. If I cannot, I will not officiate.

I believe that a non-Jew can help make a Jewish home and raise Jewish kids, if committed to doing so. That's the condition for my officiating. As a rabbi, I am officiating at a Jewish life cycle event.

I am not there to affirm the Jewish identity of one or both members of the couple, but rather the commitment in marriage that they are making [to Jewish tradition], reflected by their decision to utilize the symbols of the Jewish tradition.

I see my function as a rabbi as one who oversees Jewish rituals and ceremonies and works with people to enhance their Jewish lives. Therefore, I only work with couples who plan to have Jewish homes and Jewish children. The chuppah is a symbol of the Jewish home. I therefore will only officiate when a couple intends to create a Jewish home.

I see the Jewish wedding as ritually oriented toward a Jewish future. If the couple's marriage is a part of that picture, count me in. If they cannot commit to an exclusively Jewish future, then I'm not the right fit for them.

If their wedding is a gateway to a Jewish home (and family if they plan on children) and my officiation will facilitate their creating a Jewish home I will officiate. It is a purely subjective decision on my part. For many years I did not officiate any interfaith weddings. I changed my mind because it became clear to me that some of the couples that I was saying no to were in fact going to have a Jewish home. My involvement in their wedding enhanced their connection to Judaism, the Jewish community and me.

When I am convinced that a non-Jewish partner is open and willing to co-partner the creation of a Jewish family (and is demonstratively willing to study and learn how to do that, and is not practicing any other faith path) even if s/he is not at this time ready to make the full commitment of officially joining the Jewish people, I am willing to help them design a ceremony that embraces Jewish content in a way that has integrity.

One rabbi asks for the commitment in writing: "I ask for a written agreement that the children will be raised exclusively as Jews - having met with couples in which one spouse asked such a requirement before marriage and the other spouse did not remember making that commitment."

Some rabbis suggested that imposing requirements led to Jewish homes:

Want to encourage a connection to Judaism and commitment to raising children exclusively as Jewish. Came to see that officiating (with stipulations) is more likely to achieve these criteria in today's reality.

I learned quickly that in my showing some kindness and willingness to work with a couple in advance of their marriage – even if I was setting out some challenging requirements about there being only one religion in the home (Judaism) and about taking an intro to Judaism course and raising children exclusively as Jews – it might lead to their having more positive feelings down the road about affiliating with the Jewish community. Ultimately it feels like working with an interfaith couple in this warm and welcoming way can result in their setting up an exclusively Jewish home.

Several rabbis expressly said that they did not want to set conditions. "I am not the Jewish police, so I don't ask them to 'promise' anything other than to communicate." "Abusing my power by setting conditions shows a lack of faith in the intrinsic value of Judaism." "Officiating as a rabbi is a way to bring the couple closer to Judaism despite not worrying about their



intentions to raise kids Jewish or for a partner to convert. I do not ask my ‘two-Jew’ couples this either and believe that the key to people being involved in a Jewish community is about meaning and resonance.” Some rabbis view their role as more broad than to help create exclusively Jewish homes or Jewish children: “My holy work is to help the Jewish partner work with the future spouse to use Judaism as part of their living and loving relationship as they see fit. I use my role as rabbi to help human beings use Judaism. I am a mezuzah, not a gatekeeper.” “I am happy to support people find ways to integrate Judaism into their lives, even if both partners are not Jewish. This is the future.”

## Co-officiation

### 1. Reasons not to co-officiate

Three-quarters of CCAR/RRA respondents said they did not co-officiate. Most indicated that they officiate because it is consistent with their rabbinic mission to help create exclusively Jewish homes, and see co-officiation as inconsistent with that mission.

I don't wish to support a view that Judaism is an "option" in the couple's life among other "co-existing" or "competing" cultural expressions or life paths. While this approach might be the reality for a given couple, affirming that reality doesn't align with my sense of rabbinic purpose.

A wedding is a public statement for the type of home the couple intends to create. As a rabbi, I want to promote the creation of Jewish homes and not the creation of interfaith homes or “homes of no religions.” I believe that co-officiating does that. This is why I only officiate in ceremonies that are Jewish, even when one of the people in that ceremony is of a different faith or of no faith.

I will not co-officiate with clergy from another faith because I believe that a Jewish wedding is the foundation of a Jewish marriage, and that is a service I can provide as a rabbi. Anything other than that blurs the lines and creates confusion, or the potential of a shaky foundation from the very start. I also fear that it would invalidate or dilute the contributions from both faiths represented. I need to know that this is a choice (the choice to have a Jewish wedding and Jewish marriage/home) that both partners are making wholeheartedly.

I do not co-officiate because, as I explain to couples, my presence and the presence of the Jewish wedding symbols represent the couple's commitment to a Jewish path, not merely the fact that one of them has a Jewish identity.

I require Judaism to be the only religion of the household so it doesn't make any sense to allow another religion at the ceremony. The couples have to be committed to having a Jewish home.

When it comes to co-officiating, I believe that it should resemble the marriage. As in, just as the child should be raised in one religion the wedding should also reflect one religion.

Some do not co-officiate because they see it as leading to families with two religions or no religion.

Don't co-officiate because I don't encourage two-religion families.

Some feel that co-officiation indicates that the couple will not have a Jewish home.

[I]f there is clergy from other faiths co-officiating, my interpretation is that this couple has decided to create a family and build their home (as the chuppah represents) as one that is not a family that is committed to Judaism.

Some explain that they are present not because one of the partners is Jewish or just to marry two people, but to bring the "lens and auspices" of Jewish tradition.

Some feel that couples need clarity/resolution of the issue of religion for their family and their children at the time of the wedding and should be united, not divided.

I believe that co-officiation is simply a failure of the couple to resolve an issue that is facing them. If they cannot make a decision on how they start their marriage, they will not be able to deal with any of the myriad other issues that will arise, and the stakes will only be raised on the arrival of children.

I encourage clarity from couples with whom I work, including clarity regarding the religious flavor of the household they're creating – co-officiation might make sense under certain circumstances, but generally goes against that clarity that I hope they seek.

[Co-officiation is] philosophically separating of the partners rather than demonstrating a uniting of the two.

Some comments were quite vehement. One said co-officiating sent a message that the rabbi did not care about Judaism: "I don't co-officiate because it sends a mixed message, or at least the message that I don't care about Judaism." Another said:

I do not co-officiate because I believe Jewish family life requires that Judaism be the only religion, and religions such as Christianity are anathema to the 1st and 2nd commandment. You cannot live a Jewish life, maintain a Jewish home and participate in the covenant of our people while practicing Christianity in whole or in part. This is the same reason that students in our religious school cannot also attend another Sunday school or different religious education. Being Jewish is firstly about identity and so the family needs to make a monogamous commitment to Judaism to be part of our community and for me to officiate as a rabbi.

Others said, more moderately, that they did not want to include other faiths in Jewish rituals:

I don't co-officiate under any circumstances. For me: my ability to be present for interfaith couples at the chuppah is based on a philosophically expansive definition of what constitutes a Jewish family and Jewish home. The expansiveness is toward Jewishness, as opposed to being more inclusive of other faiths in the ritual of Judaism.

To me, co-officiating is an act that devalues the Jewish rituals and practice. I am not there just to marry two people in love and commitment, but through the lens and auspices of the Jewish religion. If another clergy from a different faith is blessing the couple through the lens of their faith, then Judaism is not needed to sanctify that union and I am not needed. Similarly, if I am there sanctifying the couple through Jewish law, then the clergy of another faith tradition is not needed. Other blessings or words of love can be shared, but if I am present, it is a Jewish ceremony in a Jewish space and time.

## 2. Reasons to co-officiate

Many rabbis who co-officiate think doing so increases the chance to have Jewish homes and children, that not doing so reduces or eliminates that chance, and that being welcoming at the time of the wedding is critical:

When I began doing interfaith ceremonies I did not co-officiate. After several years and many requests to co-officiate (and finding out that the couple ultimately chose to have a clergy of another faith officiate), I decided I wanted to have a 50/50 chance that Jewish symbols would be in the home and Jewish education would be a possibility for the children and decided to change my position.

If I don't co-officiate, they will often turn away from Judaism completely. This brings them in.

I have officiated and co-officiated at Jewish interfaith weddings for the past 18 years. I believe that interfaith families represent a hopeful element in modern Judaism. I welcome the non-Jewish families under the chuppah and offer them equal participation. When I co-officiate I stand side by side with my co-officiant, demonstrating that we share equally this ecumenical experience. The Jewish interfaith ceremony that I have created is based upon the fact that I absolutely will not risk losing the next generation of Jewish children.

I began my career by never co-officiating. I then changed my position in approximately 2005 to co-officiating as the only officiant. In 2011, I decided I would co-officiate with clergy of other religions if no mention of their Messiah were included in the ceremony. I changed my position because I did not want to distance a couple from Judaism at the beginning of their marriage.

Some mention being as inclusive as possible and respecting the couple's choices.



I will officiate and welcome other clergy participation. I believe we must be as inclusive as possible... today all religion is a religion of choice...not one is required to be religious so if someone wants a religious experience for their wedding, I respect that choice.

In my own experience and anecdotally over the years, officiating, co-officiating, in other words, welcoming and affirming couples in their choices brings them closer to Judaism and to each other. Significant numbers, though not all, of non-Jewish partners eventually chose Judaism. Even more are raising their children as Jews, with the non-Jewish partner playing a HUGE role in doing so.

I co-officiated at my son's wedding with his wife's pastor. I told people that they would hear Hebrew and the name of Jesus. I wanted to endorse, honor, and bless my son's life choice.

Some express a very broad view of their role:

In my opinion, Judaism, or any other religious tradition, is a tool for human meaning making. Traditions must serve people, but we seem to have forgotten that along the way in Jewish community. Many of us seem to feel that people are here to serve the tradition's continuity. This makes no sense to me as a Jew by choice and a rabbi. I have always and will always officiate and/or co-officiate for mixed heritage couples because they are seeking meaning and asking me to help them access Judaism as their tool of choice for this important task. The more we deny couples access to our tradition for this purpose, the more we rob them of the value that Judaism could bring to their lives and their generations' lives, and the more we potentially rob our tradition of the contributions of these couples and families with their vital perspectives and outside thinking, which it desperately needs.

My calling is to serve people not to judge them. I think I serve individual Jews and the Jewish people best through creative engagement, a practice of *tikkun olam* toward redemption. That means I accept people as they are and through a positive relationship, help them connect to Jewish practice, values and community in a way that works well for them.

[S]aying no hurts everyone and helps no one. It only protects an entrenched view of what Judaism is. I believe it is evolving and changing. Including people outside the faith into the faith is good for everyone. Genius is the ability to apply wisdom from one thought area to another so including people from other traditions in the big tent of Judaism is ultimately brilliant! Plus I think God loves love. And if two people actually find one another in this mad cap messed up world who love each other and think they can make it work, I'm pretty sure God is really happy about that. I'm happy to officiate that union and to be God's conduit.

One very senior rabbi who has officiated and co-officiated for a long time said:

I officiate and co-officiate to retain a Jew within the Jewish people and embrace a person who loves a Jew by accepting them into the Jewish community. If a couple comes to me, a Rabbi, to be part of their wedding, there is no downside and countless upsides. I have done so for the children and even grandchildren of couples who came to me for their wedding!!! I have helped raise the next generations of such couples in my school and congregation. Rather than destroying Judaism (of which I have been accused), I have enhanced and strengthened and expanded the Jewish people.

Some RRA members disagree with the RRA's prohibition of co-officiation. "[W]ith 60% intermarriage rates it's counterproductive to draw that line. I want people to think of the rabbi who helped them rather than the rabbi who rejected them. It keeps the door open for future engagement."

### **Rabbis' personal feelings**

Some comments mentioned rabbis' deep feelings about officiation. One rabbi who said that "the most important thing in life is how we make others feel" struggles with the way the rabbi is treated by some couples:

I want to be welcoming, and I know that the most important thing in life is how we make others feel... This is something I still struggle with. Sometimes I feel like couples treat me like a mannequin wearing a tallit, like I am just there for decoration and not a person with my own values system. I can say no to strangers' requests, but due to the precedent set by my predecessor, I cannot say no to congregants. This conflicts with my personal values on occasion, as I do not like being treated as a symbol of Jewish identity, when the couple has little commitment to living a Jewish life after the wedding.

Another said,

[T]his is a painful conversation to have because I have all logic and understanding that non-Jewish parents do so much for our young Jewish people and they are integral to our success in fostering a new generation of Jews. The other side is being the grandchild of Holocaust survivors and the nagging (and very irrational) feeling that "this is how Hitler wins."

### **Viewing intermarriage positively/as an opportunity/as the new reality**

Some rabbis expressed very positive views of intermarriage and the Jewish future:

I am optimistic about Judaism's ability to survive in a world with interfaith marriages. If nothing else, this world is now the clear reality. More importantly, though, I don't see interfaith marriage as a threat to Judaism or its existence- it is, instead, a natural part of Judaism existing in an emancipated world- something I'm happy about!

I believe that interfaith families are a strength in our Jewish community. Many non-Jewish spouses are very committed to raising Jewish children. This has been my own life experience and what I see in my community presently. Interfaith couples are not a threat to Judaism.

I officiate weddings for interfaith couples because I believe that Judaism has always been stronger when we are diverse and open to many different people.

I think intermarriage is necessary in the long range for improving the chances of the survival of Judaism. When we welcome intermarried couples it motivates us to think more creatively about how to engage people in Jewish life who were not raised with many of the soul killing experiences Jewish kids suffer through en route to adulthood. I also believe that the "tribalism" aspect of Judaism that resists intermarriage is fundamentally in conflict with the values that inhere within our pluralistic, tolerant society.

Some come to their positive views from personal experience. For example,

I officiate for many reasons. As a rabbi, I take pride in my role to meaningfully connect as many people to Jewish life as I can. I authentically see interfaith couples striving to pave their own Jewish path. One does not need to be Jewish to connect to our tradition, and I find much potential and opportunity in helping a couple formally begin their lives together by creating a sacred Jewish union. Time spent counseling and speaking with me or another rabbi, personally addressing the challenges each interfaith couple has can be a transformative and formidable experience. Additionally, I am a child of an interfaith marriage. My early childhood years were deeply impacted by a rabbi who said "no" to my parents. My family did not affiliate with a temple until I was 10 years old! [Rachel Sapphire]

Some commented on the prevalence of interfaith families as a new reality with which rabbis need to be engaged:

Simply put, the reality of our Jewish community today is that it includes many interfaith couples. The Jewish future is in their hands. I think I can make a difference in helping couples find their way to building a Jewish home.

First and foremost I believe that the Jewish community now includes many non-Jewish people within it. And being of service to the Jewish people involves also being available to and supportive of the people who love and are loved by Jews.

Interfaith weddings make up such a large percentage of the weddings of Jews that it would seem like rabbis are ceding the ritual to others and taking ourselves out of the Jewish lifecycle if we can't be involved in more of them.

Finally, some see officiation as an opportunity to foster Jewish choices within the new reality:



I believe that [officiation] creates greater opportunity for the Jewish future. If there are two Jewish/non-Jewish marriages for every Jewish/Jewish marriage, we must figure out a way to engage those families (and their future children) in Jewish life. I believe it is a matter of quantitative Jewish survival and that it is up to us to create the opportunities that will ensure that such survival is also qualitative.

[W]e are dealing with a gigantic sociological phenomenon, and rabbinic resistance has no impact on it. Instead, I try to make sure the couple will raise Jewish children.

The old arguments against interfaith couples no longer hold true and go against the reality of today and I believe that the only way to continue to have a vibrant and vital liberal Jewish community is by embracing peoples' choices and helping them to see that being connected to the community can provide meaning, values and structure to their lives.

When first ordained, I didn't officiate but as time went on I changed my stance because I felt that only officiating for Jewish-Jewish couples sought to preserve a fantasy version of the Jewish community that only existed in my mind and was not a reality for marrying people (or their families).

I see creating Jewish families, and particularly guiding interfaith families who want to make Jewish choices, as an urgent imperative in my rabbinate. I sometimes refer to it as an emergency. When a couple approaches me and are seeking a Jewish wedding, considering a Jewish home, and willing to do some spiritual work prior to the wedding, I do everything I can to help them...

My reason NOT to officiate had always been, "It is my job description to create and sanctify new Jewish households." And I believed that only two Jews could produce such a thing. However, real-life showed me something different and, after nearly ten years of turning down interfaith weddings, I announced my change in policy and began officiating under certain circumstances. I delivered a major sermon on the High Holy Days about my change in practice, and it was the first time that I actually received a standing ovation!