

RA Standards Working Group Report 2024

Executive Summary

Intermarriage and the inclusion of interfaith couples and families in Jewish life are among the most important issues that the Rabbinical Assembly (RA) and Conservative/Masorti movement are addressing.

Fifty years after the RA formally adopted standards that prohibited members from officiating at interfaith wedding ceremonies, our connections to these families and understanding of their roles in our communities have changed significantly. Many Conservative/Masorti congregations, particularly in North America, now include interfaith families who are raising Jewish children, participating meaningfully in Jewish life, and frequently playing leadership roles. This reality did not exist when the RA standards were implemented in the 1970s, at a time when intermarriage was viewed broadly as a “threat” to Jewish survival.

This report provides an overview of the working group’s approach, methodology, and findings. It includes a series of next steps and recommendations to move the Conservative/Masorti movement beyond a binary discussion about Jewish identity and marriage and towards the countless opportunities to welcome and engage interfaith families in the

The working group recommends that the standards around officiation at interfaith weddings be maintained at this time. However, the group is recommending other significant changes that will empower Conservative/Masorti rabbis and congregations to more fully embrace interfaith couples through their pastoral approach and through updated policies.

When the standard that prohibits officiating at interfaith weddings was established in the 1970s, the presumption was that rabbinic authority was, to a certain degree, about power. The rabbi had the authority to make decisions, including about people’s identities and relationships. That approach failed to dissuade Jewish community members from intermarrying — but succeeded in alienating many families who might participate meaningfully in Conservative/Masorti Jewish life.

Today, rabbinic authority is much more about trust and relationship. People don’t explore and evaluate their beliefs, practices, and behaviors with a rabbi because they are convinced the rabbi is right — but because they believe the rabbi knows and cares about them and because they respect the rabbi’s knowledge base and commitments.

In this new context, the SWG's report explores how rabbis can replace the legacy of disapproval. It offers a series of next steps and recommendations, including:

A fast-track review by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) of outdated teshuvot (rabbinic responses) that dictate disapproval of interfaith couples. These include archaic, decades-old prohibitions on congregations congratulating families on an interfaith couple's engagement or on hiring professionals who are in interfaith marriages. CJLS has already begun reviewing ways that rabbis can offer blessings outside the context of the wedding ceremony, including aufrufs on Shabbat morning or mezuzah hanging ceremonies [Hanukkat Habayit] in a couple's home.

Increased pastoral training related to these issues so rabbis can shift from positions of disapproval and approval to fostering meaningful dialogue as they engage with couples and families. Such conversation can help the rabbis learn more about who a couple is, what their needs are, and what roles the rabbi can play in their lives.

Creation of a "Brit" document that would articulate a positive definition of who Conservative/Masorti rabbis are, instead of relying on standards that are more focused on "what we don't do."

Through these efforts, we are committed to developing new pastoral and philosophical approaches. We are committed to moving away from policies built around rabbinic approval and "yes or no" approaches and towards those built around dialogue and shared responsibility with couples and families. We are committed to leaving behind conversations about demographics and synagogue market share so we can fully embrace our roles as pastors and teachers of Torah.

Listening Sessions and One-on-Ones – Findings

The sessions surfaced a number of themes expressing the scope of influence of the standards and what they have come to represent.

Rabbinic Authority

We heard from colleagues that "part of being a rabbi is being able to say no" and that the lines drawn in the standards when it comes to Jewish identity, marriage and divorce represent the limits of what is acceptable from a legal perspective but also moments when rabbinic authority comes into clear focus. Saying 'no' for some colleagues is what it means to lead a community that accepts the ultimate authority of the rabbi.

Other colleagues understood rabbinic authority differently and noted that “we now live in an era when clergy no longer have hegemony over lifecycle events. Friends are now officiating.” These colleagues pointed out that a rabbi’s ‘no’ is not the conclusion of a conversation but a departure point from which community members move in order to find ways to get their lifecycle or identity needs met.

What does it mean to represent a system of laws and norms and play an authoritative role in people’s lives at a time, where there are so many options?

Movement Identity and Authenticity

Some colleagues associated the standards with Conservative/Masorti movement identity and authenticity claiming that if we were to do away with them our constituencies would wonder “what distinguishes us from Reform colleagues” and that “standards make us a movement.”

Other colleagues wondered if these standards are really the bonding ideas for an ideological moment. As one colleague articulated it, “if these standards are supposed to unite us, what does it say that our fear in doing away with them is that our communities will ask us to do what these standards prohibit? Do our communities share these values with us?”

Participants also asked, “is there a way to articulate who we are aside from the standards?”

A Policy in Search of its Torah

Some colleagues felt that the standards were terse, rules oriented expressions of highly complicated issues. They felt that we need a deeper understanding of the embedded issues, more nuanced ways to express them and handle them as rabbis. One colleague asked, “what is the Torah of the standards? Can we help colleagues understand their meaning and purpose so we can implement them better?” Another said, “we need a theology around interfaith couples/marriages and the role of members of other faiths or no faith.”

Other colleagues felt that a more fleshed out discussion and articulation of the issues would help them to maintain the positions the standards intend to maintain, as one colleague said “ (I) don’t want to use the policy/halakhah as an excuse. What I want to say is that endogamy is a value.” Whatever the underlying values of the standards, these colleagues felt they would like access to them so they could feel a sense of ownership and not defer responsibility to a professional organization policy.

They Don't Engage Us

Because the policies are expressed in terse language without context, they send messages, intended or not, to our communities about our willingness to discuss the issues. One colleague said, "I used to get requests as Hillel rabbi to officiate at intermarriages. Not now. They know I don't and it makes me irrelevant to my families. People are not ashamed, they just don't tell me."

There was a sense among some colleagues that the standard and officiation are not one and the same and that they would prefer to handle these issues in the context of a relationship. As one of our colleagues said, "I would like access to these couples ahead of their wedding" and another said, "I find out about these engagements when people make donations and they are reported in our bulletin."

Colleagues said they are looking for alternative approaches as the current one is not working for them. As one explained, "the standard has not been helpful in the last 15 years. It's gotten in the way of me doing my job. Referring people out is not great. I lose people. I lose opportunities to connect with people. In my neighborhood it's causing pain for me and others."

Participation not Officiation

Colleagues interrogated the core purpose of the standards and came to different understandings about what they represented. Based on those different understandings they wondered what the territory and limits of the standards were. For example one colleague said, "I can explain halakhically why I can't officiate. I am vested with the power to do a Jewish wedding. But why can't I offer an English blessing? It would be helpful to have a teshuvah on this."

Another colleague developed language for how they speak to community members about the standard saying, "'I'm a rabbi and this is not kiddushin...' I would do this but how do we clarify what is happening Jewishly?" This colleague felt alone in thinking this through and felt that, "a teshuvah and not a standard could help sort these questions out."

Some colleagues wanted to pursue the question of the difference between officiation and participation as represented by one colleague who asked, "Is there a way to continue to not do interfaith weddings but participate? Once I tell people I won't officiate I don't see them again. I could use support from RA to figure out the nuances - can the shul be used for interfaith weddings? We need to clarify the standard and what's included and what's not"

Historical Inquiry

Original Purpose of Standard on Officiation and the Blue Ribbon Commission of 2017

Since it was clear that colleagues were not in agreement about the original purpose of the standard on officiation we looked at proceedings and minutes of the CJLS and Rabbinical Assembly conventions to see if we could clarify the intention of standards in general. In those discussions, for some colleagues the creation of Standards was about ensuring consistency of practice around Jewish identity and ensuring a unified Jewish people and Conservative/Masorti movement. For others, standards were intended to create a bulwark against change, distinguish ourselves from the Reform movement and protect colleagues against trends in the Jewish world that might create pressures on rabbis.

A statement made at the 1986 RA convention debate on creating a standard of matrilineality for Jewish identity articulates these functions:

"Standards are reactive; but the reaction is directed primarily to ourselves and to our constituents. It reaffirms our stand publicly and forcefully. Was the Standard forbidding officiating at intermarriages promulgated because significant numbers of Conservative rabbis were actually officiating at them? No. It was promulgated in order to reaffirm our absolute opposition to intermarriages in a public and forceful way because of a challenge to the norm in the larger community." (1986 RA Convention Discussion on Jewish Identity Standard).

It also became clear that the standard on officiation was intended to telegraph "disapproval" of intermarriage and "dissuade" Jews from entering those kinds of relationships as represented by this quote from RA proceedings shortly before the standard on officiation went into effect:

"[One should] dissuade any Jew who is contemplating marriage with a non-Jew from this course. He shall further consider it his duty to cooperate with the family that seeks his help in bringing all legitimate pressures and influences to bear upon the young man or woman in order to break up the proposed alliance. He must realize that this is not a matter of concern simply to a particular family, but is the concern of the Jewish people as a whole, and he is their representative." (Rabbinical Assembly Proceedings, 1964, p. 246).

This is also reflected in the minutes of the CJLS from January 1973 which stated:

“(a) Conservative rabbi may not grace by his presence either during or immediately before, or immediately after, the ceremony or reception or any celebration of a marriage in which a partner is non Jewish without any type of conversion.” (CJLS Minutes 1/20/73, p. 2.)

The thinking that gave birth to the standard on officiation was acknowledged explicitly later on as other ways of expressing disapproval such as withholding wishes of congratulations were suggested:

“The Conservative movement has been committed to discouraging both the idea and the act of intermarriage. Beside the obvious commitment of the movement to halakhah, the other major reason that such a commitment has stood is because tolerance might encourage others who are so inclined to intermarry without consequence.” (Congratulations to Mixed Marriage Families, March 20, 1989, adopted by majority of CJLS).

Those who grew up in the movement would recognize the messages that were sent in an attempt to stop a trend that leaders at the time saw as harmful to the future of Jewish identity and commitment:

“There are significant segments of the Conservative Jewish community who believe that there is a value to the application of ‘sanction’ to the sphere of intermarriage in that its application helps to maintain a climate of anxiety and tension. The anxiety and tension in connection with intermarriage may encourage parents and other concerned individuals to take stronger stands before an individual falls in love, selects a mate and presents a fait accompli....many Conservative Jews no longer exhibit embarrassment in acknowledging the intermarriage of a child or grandchild...” (Congratulations to Mixed Marriage Families, March 20, 1989, adopted by majority of CJLS).

In 2017 a blue ribbon commission was formed to address the question of whether attendance at an intermarriage was part of the prohibition on officiation. Many RA colleagues over the years had shared stories about pain caused within their extended families as they turned down invitations to attend the weddings of cousins, nieces, nephews, close friends and their own children. The commission concluded:

“On December 21, 1971, the CJLS passed this unanimously: ‘Resolved: that no member of the R.A. may officiate at the marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew. The rule is therefore now binding upon all members of the R.A.’

“We conclude that the term ‘officiate’ referred to all activities that are, could be construed as, or give the appearance of the rabbi serving as an officiant or co-officiant in the ceremony. This applies whether the rabbi presides over those activities in a recognizable Jewish form’ (e.g., ketubah, berakhot, bedeken, drash, tisch) or in another form including but not limited to:

signing or reading any of the documents of the ceremony; speaking or singing any of the liturgy of the ceremony; speaking or presiding over any related wedding ritual or ceremony.

Based on our research, as summarized above, ‘attendance’ was never elevated to the level of a Standard of Practice by the procedure, required at the time, of two consecutive unanimous CJLS votes.” (2017 Blue Ribbon Commission Report).

Through a technical reading of the process for creating the standard, the Blue Ribbon Commission concluded that an RA member attending an intermarriage is not in violation of the standard.

The Blue Ribbon Commission did important work in alleviating a tension between RA members’ commitment to their professional organization and their family. But it left open the larger question of whether the intention of the standard as a programmatic response to intermarriage had been effective. In addition, in allowing attendance it seemed to have altered how a program intended to “approve,” “dissuade,” “discourage,” and “sanction” was practiced in the field. Was “approval” no longer part of the purpose of the standard? And if so, is there a new purpose that replaces the old one?

Understanding Our Current Moment

Changes Since Standards Were Implemented

Fifty years after the standards went into effect there have been significant changes in our understanding of interfaith families and the roles they play in our communities. Demographic studies of the Jewish community analyzing how marital choices impact Jewish involvement may lead some to continue to want to rely upon policies preventing normalization of certain marital choices. However, many of us have interfaith families in our communities raising Jewish children and participating meaningfully in Jewish life. We now have RA colleagues who are products of those families. For colleagues working on the ground in communities it has become less sustainable over time to say that intermarriage is a threat to “Jewish continuity,” while the interfaith families in our communities actively work to build a Jewish future. This is a reality that did not exist when the standards were implemented.

The way identity is formed and how rabbinic authority functions have also changed. There may have been a time when someone’s identity was communally conferred or rabbinically determined. Now identity is more individually constructed or discovered and then presented to the community. The same holds true about relationships. The presumption in the past seems

to have been that rabbinic authority was to a certain degree about power. The rabbi was the one with the authority, based on training and experience, to make decisions, including about people's identities and relationships. Today rabbinic authority is much more about trust. Authority today doesn't begin with the knowledge and the credentials of the rabbi but when the person inviting the rabbi into their lives feels known. People don't interrogate their beliefs, practices, and behaviors because they are convinced a rabbi is right, but because they are convinced a rabbi knows and cares about them.

In this new context the SWG has been asking whether we are positioned to play impactful roles in people's lives with the restrictions of the standards. How do we give people the dignity of self definition when it comes to their own identities and relationships and at the same time affirm the authenticity of tradition and halakhah in the conversation? If policies that telegraphed disapproval are less effective, what new position of integrity can we establish that feels like firm, principled ground and that is also relational and relevant?

Next Steps

What would it look like to develop another position of integrity that would replace the legacy of disapproval and allow us to enter into those conversations not thinking about our needs, what we can or can't do, but the family's? What would it look like to not hold this issue as ours to solve alone but to give the work back and share responsibility with couples and families? What would it look like to use the wedding ceremony as a text that we study with the couple and allow it to be in conversation with them to figure out who they are in relation to it and who they are in relation to each other? Maybe this would allow for a critical conversation to take place about who this couple is individually, what is the mutual statement they want to make at their wedding and what is the significance, integrity and religious power of the narratives, rituals, symbols and faith statements of the Jewish wedding ceremony. Such dialogue would build on the conversations that many rabbis have long strived to have with couples about trying to picture their home in 20 years, exploring what Jewish practices they could see for their family, and sharing their dreams with one another, just as they do about careers, where to live and how many kids to have.

This is a conversation about authenticity, and as opposed to approval, it is a conversation that invites the couple, the rabbi and tradition to be in honest dialogue about identities and truth. It is a sharing of responsibility in which the couple's dignity of self-definition, their encounter with Jewish tradition in all of its religious particularity and their latitude to determine what is

authentic for them is honored and lifted up. As rabbis we represent religious particularity which means we may not be the right person to officiate, but most of this cannot be determined before a preliminary encounter. Such a conversation can help us learn more about who the couple is, what their needs are, and what roles we can play in their lives. We all have to go into these conversations with open minds and hearts. Our Rabbinical Assembly is committed to helping rabbis and communities understand the importance of these conversations.

The SWG has prototyped pastoral training with this shift in mind and suggests creating more trainings to assist colleagues in developing positions of integrity from which they can engage couples and families, without referring to the standard of religious practice while it still defines our own rabbinic commitments.

Finding New Approaches: Questions for the CJLS

The Standards Working Group developed a list of questions for the CJLS in the spirit of shifting away from approval/disapproval to new theological, halakhic and philosophical positions of integrity that acknowledge change in the past 50 years and position colleagues better to work with individuals, couples and families.

Conceptual Underpinnings and Boundaries of the Standard

Setting forth a conceptual grounding of the halakhah behind the standard. What is the nature of the prohibition against intermarriage? Given that our movement has allowed for other marriage ceremonies which lie outside the bounds of traditional kiddushin, are interfaith marriages different, and if so, how? What is the role of the officiant/mesader kiddushin, and how is it distinct from auxiliary roles that clergy and others may play in the larger context of weddings? A clear conceptual framework would make it easier to discuss the standard with integrity amongst colleagues and with those whom we serve, and to map out its boundaries. In particular, this framework is essential to answering questions that arise as to what we mean by “officiation.” Are there distinctions between a rabbi speaking to a couple under the huppah, at a rehearsal dinner or preliminary gathering, or at a reception following? What are the distinctions between different types of assistance that might be offered, ranging from providing counseling, to offering a referral to alternative officiant, to lending a huppah, to hosting an intermarriage on site at a Conservative/Masorti institution?

Ways of Blessing/Engaging Interfaith Couples Outside of the Wedding Context

Many colleagues who have no desire to change the standard still want to find meaningful ritual ways to engage with couples who are intermarrying, that are outside the context of the actual wedding. Aufruf and mezuzah hanging ceremonies have already been proposed. What types of blessing or ritual might be appropriate, within the bounds of the standard, to offer a couple who is planning to, or have already entered into, an intermarriage? How might colleagues identify which of these are consistent with their own halakhic approaches and the circumstances of their own communities?

Reconsideration of Teshuvot Dictating "Disapproval" of Interfaith Couples

As we consider how to relate to intermarried families in our midst, we note that there are topics where the most recent teshuvot of the committee, dating from more than 25 years ago, were deeply grounded in the "disapproval" frame. Examples include the the 1989 teshuvah (cited above) prohibiting congregations from offering congratulations to a family on the occasion of an intermarriage or the birth of a child from such a relationship, prohibiting the hiring of professionals who are intermarried ("Issues Regarding Employment of an Intermarried Jew by a Synagogue or Solomon Schechter Day School," 1997). These teshuvot have not had the intended effect, and do not reflect the practice of many Masorti colleagues and institutions today. Is it possible to re-examine the halakhic categories undergirding these questions? What other responses might be permissible in the current context?

Terminology regarding Patrilineal Descent

While much of the conversation has centered around the intermarriage standard, questions have also been asked about the standard of matrilineal descent. There is a generation of Jews with only a Jewish father who see themselves as Jews. While we remain committed to upholding the halakhic precedents surrounding Jewish identity and conversion, are there ways of recognizing the Jewish connections of those with patrilineal descent, such as using specific terminology which reflects their specific status, or offering an expedited path to full Jewish status? Are there corresponding pastoral approaches that sustain the integrity of halakhic precedent but also allow for the dignity of self definition?

Standards are largely about “who we are not” and “what we don’t do” – they are seen as “part of our brand/identity.” We recommend the creation of a Brit document that would articulate a positive definition of who we are as Conservative/Masorti rabbis and the nature of our Torah. It is possible that such a positive articulation in a brit could eventually replace standards.

While we are engaged in this process, based on our conversations with colleagues who hold very diverse opinions and perspectives, for now, we recommend no change in standards:

They are relied upon by a significant portion of our colleagues.

They represent a commitment to relationships among our global regions.

For some colleagues they are connected to their sense of identity as Conservative rabbis.