



Jewish Reconstructionist Communities

In Association with the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

Rabbinic Perspectives on the Partner Status Policy

Submitted by Rabbi Caryn Broitman
West Tisbury, MA

I appreciate the opportunity to write about something so important to all of us. Since writing can be somewhat impersonal, I first want to introduce myself. I graduated from RRC in 1991 and have been a congregational rabbi for the past 23 years. For the last 12 years I have had the privilege of serving the Martha's Vineyard Hebrew Center. The Reconstructionist movement has been the Jewish home for me for the last 28 years. I am a liberal Jew who loves tradition. I am a mom who, like generations of Jewish mothers before me, hopes that my teenage daughter will one day find a Jewish partner or one who wants to become Jewish, to raise a Jewish family. I am a step-mom whose stepdaughter married a wonderful non-Jewish man and together are raising a beautiful Jewish family. I am a sister, cousin and aunt whose relatives, whether married to Jews or non-Jews, are either completely uninvolved, mildly interested, or engaged. In other words, I am pretty typical in the way intermarriage has touched me.

I also believe that our rabbis, the spiritual leaders of our movement, if they choose partners, should choose someone Jewish or someone wanting to become Jewish. I oppose the change of the non-Jewish partner policy for Rabbinical students that the RRC faculty is considering, and I want to explain why.

Early in my rabbinic education I learned that a central element of Reconstructionism was peoplehood. Peoplehood fits into a larger context of what has often been called—"belonging, behaving and believing." (These are traditionally understood as God-Torah and Israel). Ideally, for a thriving and dynamic Judaism, we want to have a balance of all three. If any one of these is missing, there is a problem. Without "believing" we lose substance and purpose. Without "behaving" we lose the poetry and commitment of Jewish life. Without "belonging" we lose the idea of peoplehood, heritage and the chain of tradition. Peoplehood means that Jews are like extended family. We have a shared heritage either by birth or adoption, so to speak, which asks something of us. We choose it, and it chooses us. It has a claim on us. Belonging by itself can be empty ethnicity. Belonging in combination with behaving and believing is, for me, Judaism.

I believe that a change in the rabbinic non-Jewish partner policy, allowing Reconstructionist Rabbis to be intermarried, would dangerously weaken the value of belonging, or Jewish peoplehood. This value has been central both to Kaplanian Reconstructionism and to historical Judaism, and if such a change is approved it would radically shift what the Reconstructionist idea of Judaism is.

As we know, American Jews are unique in Jewish history in the degree to which we have been welcomed and accepted into the majority. This opportunity for integration has also

1299 Church Road, Wyncote, PA 19095
(P) 215.576.0800
JewishRecon.org / RRC.edu / Ritualwell.org

carried with it high rates of assimilation. Since the year 2,000, 72% of non-Orthodox Jews, according to the last year's Pew Study, are intermarried. Among the millennial generation, Jews who have two Jewish parents are twice as likely to identify as "Jews by religion," (in other words, belonging, behaving and believing) than those who have one Jewish parent. And of those who have one Jewish parent, only 17% are likely to marry someone Jewish, meaning assimilation rates will only get higher with each generation. Assimilation makes "peoplehood," and "living in two civilizations" very difficult. You cannot live in two civilizations if you only know one.

One may ask, given these statistics, whether it wouldn't make sense for our rabbis to reflect our members, and allow for intermarried rabbis. The problems, however, with that argument are many. First, if our Rabbis were intermarried, we would really saying that in-marriage, (and indirectly the sense of peoplehood that flows from it) is not a value to be encouraged and that it is no more or less desirable than intermarriage. Up until now, the way we have been operating as a movement has been according to the traditional Jewish legal categories of *lehatchila* (at the outset) and *bediavad* (after the fact). Currently, *at the outset* we encourage marriage to other Jews or conversion of non-Jewish partners, because of our values of peoplehood. *After the fact* we value and welcome all families regardless of intermarriage or in-marriage and meet people where they are. If we endorse rabbinic intermarriage, however, we would be endorsing intermarriage. We would be changing that distinction (between the outset and after the fact) to say rather: *at the outset*, there is no difference whether one marries a Jew or non-Jew. What matters, we would be saying, is what we *do* and *believe*, not whether anyone *belongs*. After all, the argument would go, a non-Jew can be more active in the synagogue than a disengaged Jew, and it is the *doing* that is what matters, even to the point of not belonging at all. Jews need not set out to try to marry other Jews; non-Jews need not convert, because "belonging" is not a category that has any privilege. That would be the implication of changing the policy. It would be very hard for an intermarried Rabbi to teach otherwise, and even harder for congregants, especially children, to *hear* otherwise.

That brings us to the second problem. Intermarried families do need support. Increasingly, however, so do families with 2 Jewish parents, who are becoming a minority in a minority, and have fewer places to go for support in their Jewish practice. Children of two Jewish parents (or intermarried parents) who do not celebrate Christmas, for example, and resist assimilation, are increasingly becoming a minority even in their synagogues. That minority within the minority needs the support of their Rabbi in these and other issues. Yet it would be very hard for a rabbi to give that support when he or she has embraced that level of assimilation him or herself.

On the contrary, we can expect that intermarried rabbis would likely face the same family issues that intermarried lay people do. If a rabbi is to be intermarried, is it that much more of a stretch to imagine such a household having a Christmas tree? Or a rabbi married to a minister, who is after all, a colleague? Or a rabbi bringing up children with two religious traditions?

I want to briefly address some of the arguments others have brought forth. I know some people have argued that it is hypocritical for our movement to welcome intermarried families in our synagogues but not permit intermarried rabbis. Yet, as Steven Cohen, the

demographer at Hebrew Union College said, American Jews put “rabbis at the top of the symbolic hierarchy [so] it is logical for rabbinical schools to hold rabbis to higher standards.” (<http://newvoices.org/2009/04/23/0007-3/>). The Talmud itself teaches that Scholars must be held to a higher standard, and Maimonides discusses this as well. It is not inconsistent to require more commitment from our rabbis than our lay people. It is leadership.

Some people have argued that we should not evaluate the spouse/partner of a rabbinical student as a potential “rebbetzin”. I could not agree more. We are talking about the rabbinical candidate’s commitments and choices, and what those model and communicate. We are not talking about expectations for the spouse or partner.

Finally, people have argued that Reconstructionism is about inclusion while the current policy is exclusive. The phrase “inclusion,” however, is incomplete. Inclusion of *what*? Would it be exclusive to say to an ultra-orthodox person who comes to the synagogue that he cannot lead services if he insists on a *mechitzah* (separation of men and women)? (That actually happened in my synagogue). Inclusion is not a value in and of itself. The issue is *what* you include and why. When it comes to historical injustices such as the exclusion of women or Gays and Lesbians from Jewish life and leadership, we are decidedly inclusive. When it comes to our sense of expectations of a Rabbi and what requirements we set, the current policy is inclusive of those who meet expectations we have of a rabbi. It is no more exclusive than expecting a rabbinical student to celebrate Jewish holidays or have a particular level of Hebrew.

I have tried to argue over these pages my rational reasons for opposing the change. But I want to end with something non-rational, something more intangible. I just think that the idea of intermarried rabbis crosses a basic core commitment of Judaism. I can’t fully articulate it, and maybe in time I could get used to it, but I fear that this is one more step on a path of assimilation where the tradition I love becomes weaker and weaker. I don’t want to think, as some people speculate, that only Orthodox Judaism will retain strength in America. I want to believe that liberal Judaism will continue to offer a substantive, rooted, and committed Judaism that combines a mix of belonging, behaving and believing that is challenging and transforming. I see all Jews and their families whether in-married or intermarried participating in and creating that Judaism.

I know Judaism is changing, and Rabbis should lead boldly through these changes. But they also have to be anchors. Like the deracinated Gregor Samsa of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* who waves his insect legs helplessly in the air, we are all insects, so to speak, waving our legs in the air as Judaism is undergoing a metamorphosis. We need, however, to designate some of us to keep a few of our legs rooted to the ground.

Rabbi Caryn Broitman is rabbi of the Martha’s Vineyard Hebrew Center in Massachusetts. She graduated from RRC in 1992.

Submitted by Rabbi Lester Bronstein
White Plains, NY

Let me state at the outset that I fully respect the sincerity, thoughtfulness, wisdom, intellectual prowess, and integrity of my cherished colleagues who have proposed what I believe to be a well-meaning but mistaken policy change for the RRC, and thus for the Reconstructionist Movement that nurtures and supports the RRC and relies on it for its future rabbinic leadership.

I also understand the Faculty's claim to full hegemony over its admissions policies, though I think it raises fundamental questions about the meaning of the now-completed merger of the College and lay body. I believe the Faculty understands the severity of the implications for the RRA, for the JRC, for rabbinic placement as a whole, and for the impact on our relations with the rest of the Jewish world. I know that they will not make their decision in a vacuum, and for the most part I feel their respectfulness in this matter.

I also need to state that the Faculty's paper anticipates most of the critiques we opponents have expressed, and perhaps a few we hadn't thought of. Therefore, what is left to say, minus a few technical points, is that the proposal typifies a philosophical shift – *a sea change* - in what it means to Reconstructionist Jews to articulate a notion of *religious peoplehood*. If one accepts that shift, then this proposal is timely and necessary. If one does not, then, I believe, it is anathema.

Indeed, the *chiddush* or innovative breakthrough which Kaplan introduced to American Jewish language, and which in some fashion every other Jewish movement has adopted, is the idea that Jews are not solely a religion, as the Classical Reformers would have it; nor are we solely an ethnos or national group, as the Secular Zionists, the Bundists, Yiddishists, and others would hold (and here I include any contemporary American who acknowledges Jewish "heritage" or "lineage" but entertains no religious beliefs or particular identification with things Jewish); but that we are a *religious civilization* – both religious and communal - and that the combination of the two ensures our survival and frames our aspirations going forward.

Kaplan encouraged the sort of evolution that Reconstructionists have vigorously engaged in over the recent decades. It has brought us to places Kaplan himself may not have recognized, but which have always been arrived at by carefully following his methodology. We have always leaned toward the traditional. We have always welcomed change when we felt it strengthened our religious peoplehood or when we understood there to be an ethical imperative to do so. Likewise we have avoided change when we believed it to be detrimental to that fundamental cause: *the creation and furthering of ethical religious peoplehood*.

To that end, we have made a number of bold moves over the years involving personal Jewish status, the most relevant to this discussion being our outreach to inter-partnered Jews. At every step of the way, we have continued to "privilege" (as the now pejorative term puts it) the two-Jewish partner model of marriage. When any of our rabbis perform intermarriage ceremonies, they do so according to a liturgical format closely resembling the two-Jew pattern. They refuse (on penalty of sanction from the RRA) to perform weddings along with non-Jewish clergy. They welcome the consideration of conversion to Judaism by the non-

Jewish partner. Moreover, if and when the non-Jewish partner expresses interest in conversion at a later time, albeit years after their successful integration into the life of our Reconstructionist congregations, we eagerly facilitate the conversion process.

All of this comes from our experienced realization that Jewish families are more likely to be partners in the building of our Jewish religious civilization when they continue their climb up the ladder of identity and commitment. Otherwise, it would be absurd for us rabbis even to entertain the prospect of their conversion, or *anyone's conversion*, as it might be seen as an indication that we, the rabbis, had heretofore held the couple's inter-partnered relationship as inauthentic or somehow unacceptable. Inauthentic it is not; unacceptable it is not (as a loving marriage). But neither is it ideal for Jewish continuity (statistically speaking and otherwise), and our present policies, liturgies, and structures support that point of view.

Here lies the rub. The crux of our argument with the proposed change in admissions procedures is precisely this: *It calls our cherished "religious peoplehood" into question.* It sees "peoplehood" – at least the particularist peoplehood at the heart of Reconstructionist Jewish tradition – as "tribalism." At one time, "tribe" was a benignly useful term for identifying that of ourselves that was particular versus that which was universal. At the heart of Kaplan's teaching is this precious tension between the two. By contrast, central to the idea of even allowing - much less condoning - rabbis having non-Jewish partners is the rejection of that balance in favor of the universal.

Let me acknowledge the fact that there are numerous Jews in America who want to practice Judaism and to be affiliated with Jewish congregations and communities, and who hold the idea of the tribal or particular to be tantamount to racism. It would be easy to dispute these claims based on the gross misunderstanding of the terms. But it would not help, because the fact remains that this is the way they feel. And many of them are cherished members of our affiliate congregations.

The College Faculty believes we need to re-position ourselves in order to serve this population. Their reading (I would argue it is a mis-reading) of the Pew Report encourages them in this effort. I acknowledge their compassion, their *rachmunis*. They want to reach out and help a group of Jews – along with their non-Jewish family members - who might not be helped or even cared about by the mainstream of American Jewry. They believe that if at least some of our rabbis were inter-partnered, they would boost the morale of those we have already been serving for decades in other ways. Most importantly, they would put to rest the stigma of inter-marriage by showing that even our religious paragons, our rabbis, no longer "privilege" in-marriage over inter-marriage. Once and for all, Jewish tribalism would evolve away.

I see their point. I follow their logic. I agree that by sending out inter-partnered rabbis into the world, anti-tribalists would find great encouragement. I simply don't believe that encouraging those sentiments is in any way good for the present or future of the Jewish people. I believe in continuing to privilege in-marriage, for all of the emotional, historic, and even statistical reasons I have always believed in it. I believe that privileging the in-marriage model in no way hampers our holy task of welcoming inter-marrieds and helping them to create Jewish homes and lives, if that is their sincere desire. If it is not their sincere desire,

then I believe we need to leave a door open for them, as it were, but to concentrate our efforts on those in-marrieds *and* inter-marrieds who want to be part of the proudly particular historic tribe of Israel, the Jewish people.

I am not alone among my colleagues, nor am I a singular voice in my own congregation, many of whose members agree with me that this move would be a barrier-crosser that puts into question our fundamental relationship with the movement. We who oppose this measure would like to remain part of the movement that has been for us the most viable vessel of modern Jewish expression available. If we cannot go with the movement to this new place and definition, which from our perspective is not good for the Jews in general or the Reconstructionists in particular, then we will face our own difficult decision. We say these words not as a threat, but as a plea to our fellow Reconstructionists to understand the degree to which this measure symbolizes for us a new and unrecognizable direction.

A point about placement policy in the future: On the day when a JRC-affiliate congregation chooses not to interview a rabbinical candidate because he or she is partnered with a non-Jew, I predict that all of the rabbis in the interview pool will express their solidarity by boycotting that congregation, just as they now properly do when a congregation refuses to interview a gay candidate, or a female, or a transgender, or a male or straight rabbi for that matter. If the students-soon-to-be-rabbis truly believe in the integrity of this cause, they will support it collectively, despite the promise in the College's paper that congregations will retain the option to privilege in-partnered rabbis over inter-partnered ones.

One further word about the Faculty's role *vis-à-vis* our movement as a whole: We certainly understand that the Faculty needs autonomy in order to maintain academic accreditation. But for us in the Movement, the College is not just an academic institution in the way that, say, our children's colleges and graduate schools are. For us, it is primarily the training body of our reservoir of rabbis. We and the College are one. We are in this together. We're not talking here about admission standards for some autonomous university in the next town that's giving master's degrees and doctorates in academic subjects. The College is us. Its graduates are our rabbis.

The College is talking about nothing less than the radical redefinition of something basic about the identity of rabbis. If we want to do that, fine. But the College cannot do it independently of the rest of us, because they *are* us. Likewise, they can't *not* do it if we all want it to happen.

I *don't* want it to happen. But it's our decision to make *with* the Faculty, and not as an "affirmation" of their independent decision. We are talking about a precedent that fundamentally alters what it means to be the Jewish Reconstructionist movement and to create religious peoplehood.

Let me conclude by saying that as proud and knowledgeable Reconstructionists, we believe we have a right and an obligation to insist that our most central and prominent religious models, *viz.* our rabbis, demonstrate in their personal lives a standard which many of us may not be able to emulate, and which the rest of us are not obligated to replicate, but which all of us will be able to strive toward, and at least to learn from, as we each struggle to construct

our own Jewish destinies.

For these reasons, I strongly oppose the Faculty's proposal.

Rabbi Lester Bronstein is rabbi of Bet Am Shalom Synagogue in White Plains, New York. He graduated from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1987.

Submitted by Rabbi Mychal Copeland
Mountain View, CA

Dear Reconstructionist community,

I am hopeful about the possible change in the College's Non-Jewish Partner policy and thank you for the opportunity to share some of my thoughts.

First, I appreciate what a difficult issue this is and commend the College and the movement for opening up the conversation. I feel the full import of the decision at hand and the wide reaching implications it will have, if changed, upon the movement at large. I attended the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College from 1995-2000 and had a mostly wonderful experience there; the learning, the community, the teachers and leadership. But I had a partner who wasn't Jewish throughout rabbinical school who converted a few months before my graduation, and my experience at RRC was deeply affected by the NJP (Non-Jewish Partner) policy.

Although I have many good friends and connections from that time in my life, I also distanced myself from the administration and many students, as well as the Mt. Airy community as a result. We didn't want my partner's decision concerning conversion to be controlled by others or part of a public debate, so we tried to keep a low profile throughout my five years at the college. We have both been clear that we never blamed the College for our experiences of being somewhat "closeted" as an interfaith couple.

We knew the policy and chose to handle the question of her conversion between us, which did cause some sense of isolation. In fact, the policy was written in order for a couple like us to make that decision approaching graduation.

The ironic piece of our story is that my partner had been drawn to Judaism for quite a while, even before we met. One of the factors that attracted us to one another was a fascination with religion and while I was pursuing rabbinical school, she was earning a PhD in Religious Studies at Princeton. Well before converting, she possessed a vast knowledge of the tradition, languages, and culture of Judaism beyond what most Jews know. Friends of mine at the College marveled at how much more connected to Judaism she was than many of their Jewish partners. Yet the NJP policy made her decision to convert feel forced and inauthentic. I was in the strange position of never, personally, needing her to convert ~yet I was the reason she had to. She couldn't imagine standing between me and my chosen profession.

I love my work as a rabbi, but over a decade and two children later I have to admit that I still carry a sense of regret that she converted. There were many times when we debated my not finishing RRC. My partner saw my passion for this work and didn't want me to leave it behind. She has always said that what made it possible for her to convert was that I would have left RRC for her if she had not, in the end, been willing to do so.

A second reason she resisted conversion was her family. She had just undergone a difficult process of coming out as a lesbian with her family of origin, and now she had to weather another potential conflict with their values and world view. The fear of alienation from loved

ones is a powerful reason many refrain from officially joining the Jewish people. And I believe it is a very Jewish reason. With the strong emphasis we place on family, I sometimes find it surprising that we close our eyes to the familial disenfranchisement that often accompanies conversion into our tradition. I remember hearing during my years at RRC that as a result of the NJP policy and invitations to convert to Judaism in general, so many wonderful people join the Jewish community. While I know this sentiment emerges from an earnest place, it ignores the reality that for many, this decision is deeply fraught. Furthermore, no one wants to feel they have been “won” or are building up our numbers. This is no way to enter a spiritual community. Many believe that Jewish “fellow travelers”, as I call people who travel the path with the Jewish people without wanting to convert, only need an invitation to realize the door is open. I would argue that, for many, they know they are welcome to convert and have powerful reasons to refrain. Asking only reifies their feelings of being less than acceptable to the Jewish people, regardless of the lengths they may go to infuse their homes with Judaism. In some cases, instead of receiving thanks for taking on a tradition foreign to them, they are treated like the scapegoat, taking on all of our community’s woes about survival.

I felt back at RRC, and still feel, that my decision to become a rabbi was my decision, and that my partner’s identity should have no impact on my work. I remember hearing the worry that a rabbi with partner who isn’t Jewish would never find work. While I know that the College and the movement had a stake in my finding work throughout my career, I felt that it should have ultimately been my problem to solve. I also knew I could seek out avenues of Jewish leadership that would see me as an asset with all of the complexity that I was to bring rather than a liability. Would I have been hired everywhere I have had the opportunity to work in my career as it developed? Almost assuredly not. However, I am confident that if not, I would have found corners of the Jewish world that would have been happy to have me. In fact, it may have forced me to engage my own authentic Torah earlier in my career. Now that I have been working as a rabbi for 14 years, I know that my partner’s converted status doesn’t affect who I am as a rabbi. It doesn’t change the religiosity of our home. I have worked at two Hillels, and most students assumed that she was not Jewish and were not bothered by it. My partner’s religious life has had absolutely no bearing on my ability to serve the Jewish community. She is the same person she would have been without the conversion. I am the same rabbi.

One piece I think is often overlooked in this debate is that the role of the rabbi’s spouse is different than it once was. My partner does reclaim in some ways the term, “rebbetzin”, when she is actively helping me accomplish my rabbinic goals. But she is not a rebbetzin in the classic sense, and has a full career of her own. She helps me model creating a Jewish home, but it is not her job to do so. Part of this phenomenon is a result of a partnership between two women, but a larger issue is that women entering the rabbinate in general has changed the expectations of the non-rabbinic partner regardless of sex.

I argued during rabbinical school that I wanted to ultimately serve the Jewish interfaith family community. I felt that as someone in an actual interfaith relationship, I was in a perfect position to serve as a role model for this community which has grown even since my graduation. In fact, I recently wrote an article highlighting Ephraim and Menasseh as role models of Jewish leaders who intermarried. I strongly believe that a rabbi with a partner who

is not Jewish is the ideal person to teach interfaith couples how to truly manage the struggles and celebrations that come with mixed backgrounds. Such a person comes with personal experience, but also without judgment. Liberal Jewish establishments have moved over time from tolerating interfaith marriages to welcoming them. But if our rabbis cannot partner with people who are not Jewish, there remains a layer of distrust and judgment. Interfaith families still feel that subtle or not-so-subtle difference. Graduating rabbis in interfaith households who are exemplars of living a vibrant, contemporary Judaism could change this and, with it, our Jewish future. Rabbis are to be “of the world” rather than living in a separate sphere from our constituents. Rabbis with partners who aren’t Jewish are uniquely situated to bring wisdom, knowledge and compassion to families of mixed backgrounds. Such a rabbi also sends another important message: one’s choice of spouse does not necessarily correlate to one’s commitment to a Jewish life. Intermarried families convey this to me as they recount the story of how central Judaism is in their family life. Who could better understand and model this important distinction than a rabbi partnered with someone who is not Jewish? As rabbis, we dedicate ourselves to the Jewish enterprise. If that isn’t a wonderful demonstration of commitment, regardless of choice of partner, I am not sure what we are hoping for our Jewish future. Interfaith couples need us, they need to hear that message, and Reconstructionism is the perfect movement to be there with them on their journeys.

As for conversion, I feel that it is often seen as an instantaneous corrective to the problematization of intermarriage. The reality for many couples is that the issues they faced before a partner converted are still present. Going to Christmas at the in-laws, leaving meaningful traditions behind, not feeling fully accepted into Judaism—these issues don’t magically disappear when someone enters the mikveh, regardless of how heartfelt the intention. So even though my partner converted, I have been in a position to walk this path with couples and families I work with and manage expectations of conversion when a partner does choose a formal path into Judaism.

Lastly, I personally know many people the Reconstructionist movement has lost because of this policy. They could have been the most exceptional Jewish leaders of this generation. The fact that so many intermarried Jews look to Reconstructionism as a possible place to exercise their leadership should tell us that our values are, indeed, aligned with this change. When I was a student in the 1990’s, perhaps it would have been too early to change this policy. But I hope we are ready, now, to make this bold statement and be the forward thinkers we have always been.

I recently became the Bay Area Director of Interfaith Family, so my work now revolves around these questions on a daily basis. I decided to bring this issue to the center of my rabbinate because I feel strongly that how we deal with intermarriage will determine our future. This is a pivotal moment in our history, and the degree to which we are able to be expansive in our approach will make the difference. On a personal level, I feel like my rabbinate has been leading me to walk this path. In my work, I tell the interfaith couples with whom I work about my own story. Living the same questions they struggle with gives me credibility. I am not just another Jewish leader welcoming them with one hand while scolding them – or treating them as second class citizens-with the other. They trust me, and I enjoy sharing with them the ways we have made Judaism work in our home and with our extended families. After all of those years fearing that my relationship was a liability, I now

draw on my personal stories to model for others how good communication, flexibility, and introspection help couples navigate difficult religious questions.

I hope that we are able to make the historic and timely decision to fully embrace the many interfaith couples in our communities. I firmly believe that this will be important not only for individuals, but also for Judaism's ability to continue to transform and evolve as a civilization in a new era in which intermarriage will be a significant part of our future.

Some of my writing about my own family's experiences on www.interfaithfamily.com :

<http://www.interfaithfamily.com/blog/iff/intermarriage/how-i-met-the-mother-of-my-children/>

<http://www.interfaithfamily.com/blog/iff/passover-and-easter/my-wife-eats-cereal-in-the-garage/>

<http://www.interfaithfamily.com/blog/iff/interdating/my-marriage-choice-doesnt-dictate-my-jewish-commitment/>

<http://www.interfaithfamily.com/blog/iff/outreach/lilith-the-quintessential-jewish-outsider/>

<http://www.interfaithfamily.com/blog/iff/marriage-and-relationships/breaking-bread-with-the-in-laws/>

<http://www.interfaithfamily.com/blog/iff/growing-up-in-an-interfaith-family/jewish-genes-are-they-in-our-dna-or-in-our-stories/>

<http://www.interfaithfamily.com/blog/iff/parenting/do-parents-need-to-present-a-united-front-about-god/>

Rabbi Mychal Copeland is Director of InterfaithFamily/Bay Area. She graduated from RRC in 2000.

Submitted by Rabbi Elyse Wechterman
Attleboro, MA

I've done an about face.

I used to believe that of course, RRC should not accept students nor graduate students who were partnered with non-Jews. After all, there is no "right" to become a rabbi and the decision to partner with a non-Jewish person is a personal one. Unlike the ordination of gay and lesbian candidates, or women for that matter, there is no social justice issue, no human rights issue at stake.

In this country, any faith community has the right to determine for itself what is required of its leaders: what values, characteristics, behaviors and choices are incumbent upon those we empower to stand before us - both literally and figuratively - on the pulpit. And of course, endogamy, the choice to marry someone from within our own faith community, would be one of those expectations.

But then I became a rabbi.

Over the course of a decade serving as a rabbi in a small, Reconstructionist congregation in New England, I've learned that all marriages are, at some level, intermarriages; that some couples negotiate the challenges of living meaningful Jewish lives better than others - regardless of each partner's identity and practice; that commitment to Jewish life and learning is a countercultural battle no matter who you are; that intermarriage isn't always a threat, nor is in-marriage always a boon, to the Jewish people; and that, the answer to the question: are rabbis with non-Jewish partners good or bad for the Jewish people is, like in most things Jewish: "Well, it depends."

And therein lies the problem with the RRC's current policy as written.

The Jewish community needs rabbis. And it needs rabbis who are thoughtful, passionate, creative, responsible, insightful, intelligent, and committed to the ongoing development of Jewish life and living. We need rabbis who see possibilities at every corner and who understand Judaism's actual and potential contributions to a redeemed world. We need rabbis who understand that the Jewish people and Judaism need to survive, not for its own sake, but because humanity needs us, because the planet needs us, because we have a role to play and a message to teach about how human beings need to treat each other, how to care for our planet and how to make that hidden Power that Makes for Salvation¹ visible and manifest on Earth.

And in my experience, rabbis, like most people, perform their jobs better when they are in supportive, loving, balanced and nourishing environments and when their families (both those they create and those from which they come) are supportive, nourishing, interested, and caring companions for this journey through life. Sometimes those supportive companions are Jewish - and sometimes they have a different tradition, a different background from which to pull. But what's crucial, in my opinion, is less about their

¹ Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan's most quoted definition of God is "The Power that Makes for Salvation"

religious, ethnic and cultural identity and more about their willingness and ability to jointly walk the path I outlined above.

I believe RRC's current policy of prohibiting the acceptance and graduation of individuals with non-Jewish life partners should be abolished because

- A. I believe rabbinic marriages and families are important to the Jewish future
- B. I believe that all marriages and partnerships are challenging and require hard work and negotiation
- C. I believe that, despite our discomfort with it and desire that it be otherwise, rabbis (and their families) are looked at as role models, examples and guideposts for those we serve
- D. And I believe that the current policy does not allow us (the Reconstructionist community at large and the RRC in particular) to address any of these issues explicitly nor provide guidance or information for those looking to take on this important leadership role for our community.

Let me elaborate each point:

A. **The importance of rabbinic families.**² From my own experience, I know that that demands of the job of rabbi are enormous. We lead very stressful lives, often in the public eye. We work many hours and much of our "professional time" occurs during what others would normally consider "family time" (think Shabbat services, Sunday morning Hebrew school, holiday programming, and evening meetings). I could not have done any of this in my 13 years at a congregation without the explicit support of my partner and family. My partner not only takes up the slack when I am not at home, takes the bulk of child care and household responsibilities when I am "on" but he also serves as a sounding board, co-collaborator, editor of sermons, tester of theories and first audience for much of what I do.

He is as committed to my work and to my success as I am.

But so am I to his. This dependency, collaboration and partnership is certainly not unique to the profession of rabbi. The supportive partners of doctors, journalists, plumbers, veterinarians, dentists, politicians, chefs, mechanics, teachers, you-name-it, support the work of their partners in so many small and subtle ways. They learn about it, they take an interest in the subject matter at hand. They get excited over new learnings and discoveries and listen, patiently, to complaints and frustrations as they occur. They show up at important functions and smile, and they welcome parts of our work into our homes. And they do this because they are loving partners – not necessarily because they share the same background or interest or education.

We all know families where this is done well – where the partners are each other's cheerleaders and collaborators. We know this is true in families where partners are both Jewish and where they have different traditions. And we know that the fact of a shared heritage or tradition does not guarantee this kind of support.

² I am conscious that I am making a pro-family, pro-marriage argument and that there are many rabbis who are single (either by choice or circumstance). What I know is that they too need the support of family and intimate friends and that though not all of what I am saying might apply, my general argument that the most successful rabbis are those who are most successfully supported in their private as well as public lives holds.

I know colleagues whose Jewish partners are hostile to their work, who carry their own Jewish wounds on their sleeve and who take no interest in the vocation of their partner. I have heard how painful this is for those colleagues in this situation. And I know colleagues with interfaith relationships whose non Jewish partners are the first to cheer them on and are passionately and powerfully involved in supporting their partner's leadership in the Jewish community. The Jewish identity or lack thereof is not the key factor at play in this dynamic.

B. **Marriage and partnerships are hard.** With nearly half of all marriages ending in divorce, we know that endogamy is no guarantee of success for a couple. Yes, religious differences are challenging to a couple; but so are finances, child-rearing, family obligations, health concerns and so much of life in a normal family. Successful partnerships seem to be those in which both partners support each other and cheerlead for each other; where communication is open, honest and frequent; where negotiations over how to do things are constant, and ever-evolving. Successful partnerships require a commitment to figuring things out together and not making any assumptions about practices and behaviors. Some of the best marriages I know are of people from very different backgrounds. It seems their very differences are the catalyst for conversations, for ongoing discussions about how to do things.

No two people are exactly the same – therefore all marriages are, at some level, intermarriages. My partner and I are exactly three months apart in age and grew up in similar suburbs equidistant from New York City. We share some of the most basic cultural references and experiences. And yet, we have negotiated every aspect of our lives from how we observe Shabbat to how to manage arguments over toothpaste. We've talked through parenting styles, food expectations, and almost every aspect of Jewish observance you could name. None of it was assumed – and none of our discussions are ever over. It's an ongoing, evolving process, like all of (Jewish) life. As we have come to understand each other's different perspectives we have each been enriched and have grown.

Having watched numerous couples take on the burden of negotiating their religious and spiritual lives, I can say that interfaith or mixed-faith couples are often more knowledgeable, more committed and more able to articulate their Jewish practice than Jewish-Jewish couples. I do not think that it is a coincidence that some of the most active members of a congregation have non-Jewish partners. Sometimes, it's the very struggle to understand and articulate an identity that gets us more fully immersed in it.

C. **Rabbis and their families are role models.** For better or worse, my children have always been looked at as “the rabbi's kids.” Our family has always been “the rabbi's family.” Our Shabbat table has always been a place of learning and education for members of the community. It's the nature of the job. Some of us rise to this well, some of us resent it, and some of us don't really care. But regardless of our feelings, there will always be someone ready to look into our shopping cart at the grocery or eye our behavior at our child's sporting event or comment on our choice of vehicle. I do not believe that rabbis and their families must always comport themselves based on the expectations of others. But I do believe that it is incumbent on us as a movement to educate our rabbinical students and their partners should they have them on this reality.

Up until now, I think the expectation was that Jewish families would know how to do manage this and that we would learn quickly on the job. This is not sufficient. The RRC, and also the RRA, must provide better education and preparation for rabbinical students and rabbis and their families in negotiating these issues. Our goal should not be to enforce a certain set of standards or require conformity to expectations, but to enable our leaders and their families to make appropriate choices fully armed with an understanding of their implications.

We know full well that how our rabbis and their families behave impacts their ability to lead and teach those they serve. Rabbis who honestly, openly and transparently struggle with their own practices and beliefs are often the most inspiring to others. How exciting it is to imagine a rabbi and his or her non-Jewish partner struggling with integrity and honesty with the same issues so many of the people we serve face every day.

D. **RRC's current policy doesn't work.** By drawing an arbitrary line in the sand, the RRC does not have to ask of itself and its students any of these hard questions. That easy answer no longer suffices. In order to ensure that we have a next generation of rabbis to lead our community, we need to ask the hard questions of what kind of leaders do we want and need. We need rabbis who are committed to living with integrity, to struggling with what it means to be Jewish honestly and transparently and to engaging with their community and peers in these very questions regardless of who their current and future partners may be. And we need a rabbinical college and that is ready to support its students and their families in their ongoing journeys of Jewish leadership no matter who makes up their families.

Doing away with RRC's current policy will make the job of the admissions committee harder – instead of a hard rule, they will have to rely on their knowledge, experience, patience, listening skills, judgment, discernment and faith – just like the best rabbis do every time they are asked a question.

Rabbi Elyse Wechterman is an adjunct faculty member at Bristol Community College, community educator and freelance rabbi. She graduated from RRC in 2000.