

# Congregations & Intermarrieds Implicit or Complicit

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## Introduction

In a paper published in Intermarriage: Concepts and Strategies for Families and Synagogue Leaders, entitled, *It's the Bulletin not the Bima!* I suggest a more needed recognition of demographic change, i.e. intermarried families in the community, would be the inclusion of acknowledgements of intermarriages in the synagogue bulletin rather than merely their positioning on the *bima*. It is my belief that while it is important for a person who was born into a different faith tradition to be an integral part in family life cycle occasions, what is more meaningful to the intermarried family is the way they are treated and how their *simcha* is acknowledged by the community. It is also my contention that the place where community values are most clearly shared is through its publications.

Yet my experience and the results of a recent survey suggest otherwise. The choreographic variations that take place on the *bima* in our synagogues in an attempt to create a welcoming atmosphere rival the efforts of major dance companies.

FJMC has been conducting *keruv* rabbinic think tanks since 1999, and each year during the course of this twenty-four hour seminar someone always asks whether or not the item has been placed on the agenda, "What takes place on your *bima* during *b'nai mitzvah* when the parents are intermarried?"

The survey revealed that rabbis and/or congregational leadership do a wonderful job in finding creative ways of welcoming the non-Jewish spouse on the *bima*. Yet there is

no reflection of this approach in their printed publications, websites and multi-media communications vehicles. Powerful messages can be transmitted through bulletins, websites and Shabbat morning handouts. It causes one to wonder whether the absence of these messages in these communication vehicles is the result of conscious decisions or thoughtlessness.

The process of modifying congregational policy is complicated and, in a majority of instances, rabbis who wish to find a comfortable place for the non-Jewish spouse on the *bima* during *b'nai mitzvah* are hesitant to attempt to implement change until they learn what is occurring in other congregations. This paper and the survey that preceded it, is an attempt to take that conversation off the table and replace it with other topics of substance. FJMC Outreach professional, Lynne Wolfe and the FJMC Keruv (volunteer) consultants, gathered the needed data.

## The Process

An extremely brief questionnaire was developed and was initially forwarded to FJMC Keruv (volunteer) consultants requesting they explain their synagogue's customs and record the needed information from two neighboring Conservative synagogues.

The questionnaire was then e-mailed to rabbis in different regions in order to obtain what we thought would be a reasonable number of responses from which general trends could be extrapolated. One hundred questionnaires were e-mailed to one hundred rabbis and eighty-five were returned. When cross-referenced with the information received from the Keruv consultants we were able to determine that one hundred congregations in North America were represented.

Congregational responses reflected every geographical region: exurban, suburban and urban synagogues both small and large. The survey was composed of two questions; one pertained to the non-Jewish parent's role at *b'nai mitzvah*, the other to a baby naming. Permission to use the rabbi's name was requested, and a majority responded affirmatively.

## The Results

It was surprising for us to learn that geography did not play a significant role in determining congregational practice. One would have thought that the practices in some regions would be more liberal and accepting than those in others. Our results showed no correlation between practice and region. For example, a congregation in Toronto's *bima* practice was more liberal than a congregation in Northern California. Similarly congregational size and location, (urban verses suburban) were not determining factors. It seems that local cultural practices had more of an influence than general geography or congregational size.

Seventy-nine of the one hundred congregations allowed the non-Jewish spouse to stand next to the Jewish spouse on the *bima* at the time of the *aliyah*. Fifty-nine of them permitted both parents to stand on the *bima* during the bestowing of a blessing and fifty-two of them had both parents take part on the *bima* in a *tallit* ceremony. *Tallit* ceremonies and the bestowing of blessings have not been standardized.

Congregations were much more liberal when it came to the naming of a baby. Seventy-nine of the eighty-six congregations that responded to this question permitted babies to be named in a ceremony that involved both parents standing on the *bima*. Three did not and four indicated that the naming of a baby never occurred on the *bima*.

## Implications

Considering the lack of information available about congregational customs and practices it appears that acceptance of the non-Jewish spouse on the *bima* is taking place indigenously in urban, suburban and exurban communities both large and small. While data, to my knowledge, is not readily available, I suspect that most people would agree that this represents a major change from congregational practices a decade ago.

It is interesting to note that of the congregations that do not permit non-Jewish spouses to stand on the *bima* during *b'nai mitzvah*, seven of the ten permit the non-Jewish spouse to be on the *bima* during the naming of a baby.

What I found to be truly surprising is that almost all of the congregations are more welcoming to the non-Jewish spouse and intermarrieds when it comes to *bima* choreography than they communicate through their websites. In sharp contrast to what actually occurs in many of our places of worship, the significant omission of the word "intermarried" on a majority of the congregational websites and the lack of a description how intermarrieds are welcomed and perhaps most importantly, what the congregation offers an intermarried family that wishes to create a Jewish home, is rarely present. Only eleven of the one hundred websites reviewed welcomed intermarried families on the opening page, twelve were one click away, three were two clicks away and seventy-four lacked any reference to intermarrieds at all.

One would think that if congregational leadership wished to advertise their welcoming atmosphere they would make an attempt to publicize it more readily. On the other hand this omission could reflect a hesitancy to reach out to intermarrieds coupled with a begrudging acceptance that if intermarrieds wandered into our sanctuaries they would be treated with dignity. Clearly each congregation needs to understand the nature of their message.

## The Survey

Please check “x” regarding your congregational practice.

1) Is the non-Jewish parent permitted to be on the *bima* with the Jewish parent at their child’s *b’nai mitzvah*?

Not at all

Standing as part of the family when the *Aliyah* is recited

For a joint blessing

For a *Tallit* presentation

2) Are babies named on the *bima* in your synagogue?

Y/N

If yes, when one parent is not Jewish are they permitted to stand on the *bima*?

Y/N

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