

Non-Jewish Partners

Dear Members:

The membership of Congregation Beth El reflects the trend in contemporary North American Jewish communities in our large percentage of families in which only one spouse or parent is identified as Jewish. We clearly welcome “interfaith” families and to date have had policies in place in some areas regarding the participation of the non-Jewish partner. However, a lack of clear, written guidelines in the past has caused some awkward and even painful misunderstandings.

Recently, the Ritual Committee authorized a small subcommittee of members, along with the rabbi, to review our current policies and assumptions and suggest a format for a printed guide which will be available to all members. The members of the subcommittee represented long-term members, newer members, members from exclusively Jewish households, and non-Jewish partners from interfaith households.

Our goal was to create a clear statement of welcome to non-Jewish partners while at the same time preserving the Jewish nature of the congregation and upholding Jewish traditions in accordance with our communal practice. The subcommittee studied which ritual and leadership functions are traditionally reserved specifically for Jewish members and which limits or boundaries of participation were simply assumed and observed out of habit or under the guidance of the rabbi. We also researched the practices and guidelines of the major movements in the North American Jewish community (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist) and surveyed communities of like-size and demographics to ours to see how they addressed the issue.

The resulting document represents a clarification of the current practices we have been following presumptively within the congregation. No new guidelines or radical changes were considered necessary---just the need to put our expectations in writing. Having a printed guide will give all members a clear understanding of what we mean when we say that we welcome interfaith families.

Ger Toshav: Non-Jewish Members at Congregation Beth El-Sunbury, A Guide

“Ancient Jewish civilization recognized the existence of people, living in the areas of Jewish domain, who, while not Jews themselves were nonetheless favorably disposed toward Jews and Jewish life, and who, in fact, identified with many basic Jewish social and cultural institutions. Such people were surely strangers but they were not foreigners. They were surely outsiders, but they chose to have at least some portion in the congregation of Jacob. Such people divested themselves of many of their alien connections but, for whatever reasons, did not come to identify fully as members of the flock. Such people were the outsiders-insiders, the resident aliens, the fellow-travelers of antiquity... Such was the ger toshav.” Ronald M. Brauner, “Ger Toshav: Reviving an Ancient Status.” The Reconstructionist (April, 1982)

Congregation Beth El offers worship, celebration, support, and education to children, adults, and extended family members to help strengthen and enhance the Jewish home and community, including, if desired, the opportunity to study for conversion. We also recognize that, as an egalitarian, diverse, and inclusive Jewish community, our lives are enriched by the presence and participation of non-Jewish partners and family members in our congregation. At the same time, Judaism (like other faiths) has traditionally identified certain responsibilities and privileges available to those who are born into, or convert into, our faith. The purpose of this Guide is to help clarify what it means to be a non-Jewish member of a congregation dedicated to Jewish life, practice, and learning.

In general, a non-Jewish partner or family member may participate in all aspects of the congregational life with the exception of rituals and practices that expressively convey or affirm Jewish identity. Jewish communities vary as do their individual and communal decisions. The following guidelines represent the values of the Congregation Beth El membership and are affirmed by our governing Board. Individuals should always consult with the rabbi if they have any question about their own, or their family's status, either at Congregation Beth El or in the wider Jewish community. Please note that some of these guidelines include the phrase "*with advisement*." These are areas where the policy of our congregation may not be affirmed in other Jewish communities. The rabbi will work with the individual or family in these cases to weigh the implications of the decision and the options for alternatives.

Membership:

- The non-Jewish partner/family member is considered a member of the congregation when part of a Family Membership, in good standing and at least one head-of-household is Jewish. In the event that the Jewish partner is no longer part of the household, membership may be extended in consultation with the rabbi and the board.
- The non-Jewish partner/family member has a vote as member at congregation meetings.
- The non-Jewish partner/family member may not serve on the board of directors.
- The non-Jewish partner/family member may serve on subcommittees.

Ritual Life:

- Non-Jewish partner/family members are invited and encouraged to participate in all worship services, ritual events and gatherings offered at the synagogue.
- Non-Jews do not participate in ritual honors that expressly convey Jewish identity (aliyot; prescribed blessings; carrying, lifting, wrapping the Torah; signing as an "eid" or Jewish witness on ritual documents; lighting Shabbat or holiday candles)
- Similarly, non-Jews may participate in matters of *minhag* (custom) but not *halakha* (Jewish law), *with advisement*;* for example:
- wearing kippot is a matter of *minhag*, but a tallit is commanded through *halakha* as a marker of Jewish identity and commitment so would not be appropriate.
- the Yahrzeit Board is reserved for Jewish members but the *halakha* of kaddish allows for a Jewish person to say Kaddish for a non-Jewish relative.
- The non-Jewish partner/family member cannot constitute part of a *minyan* (the quorum of 10 Jewish adults necessary for some ritual and liturgical practices)

- The non-Jewish partner/family member may be buried in synagogue cemetery according to guidelines of the Cemetery Policy.
- The non-Jewish partner/family member may accompany partner or child to an *aliyah* during Torah service but does not say blessings.
- Interfaith weddings are not performed in the synagogue building.

Education:

- Non-Jewish partner/family members are invited and encouraged to participate in all educational programs and events offered at the synagogue.
- Children with only a Jewish father can receive Jewish rites and attend Hebrew School if no other religious tradition is being followed and *with advisement*.*
- Children with only one Jewish parent may attend Hebrew School if she or he is not engaged in any other formal religious training.
- The non-Jewish partner/family member may teach in Hebrew School.

*With advisement: These decisions are made at the discretion of the rabbi, and all the family members are advised of the range of acceptance in other Jewish communities and offered the opportunity for a conversion or alternative which would be acceptable in most Jewish communities.