

## Officiating at Mixed Marriages

*Dear Friends -*

*I am writing these words in September 2017. More than a decade has passed since I wrote the following article for the December 2006 issue of the Sinai Temple Bulletin. When I wrote the 2006 article, I proposed moving into a year of learning in which I would meet couples where one partner was Jewish and the other not. I wanted to work with them so that they could prepare themselves for a wedding ceremony at which I could officiate.*

*The good news is that many couples have come forward in these last years. They have wanted to create a Jewish home and it has been my honor to help them move toward that goal. It has then been my pleasure to officiate at their weddings. The whole process requires sensitivity and commitment, but I believe we are heading in the right direction for everyone.*

*If you are an engaged couple where one of you is Jewish and the other not Jewish or if you are thinking about marriage or if you are just plain interested, I hope you will find the following article helpful. It represents my heartfelt thoughts about the new world of love and marriage in the 21st century.*

*Let me know what you think. I welcome your responses.*

*Shalom,  
Mark Shapiro*

I am going to make a change, but you have to read several paragraphs into this article before learning what the change is going to be. You will need to read that much because the change I am proposing comes out of a long, heartfelt, complex, serious process.

The change has to do with mixed marriage and the way I respond to it.

In and of itself, mixed marriage is a complicated issue. Depending on who you are, mixed marriage may or may not be a significant fact of life for you. Or it may, in your opinion, be a blessing or a curse. However, one thing is for sure. This past Yom Kippur morning 2006 Sinai certainly made a bold statement about mixed marriage. I believe many of you were pleased and surprised when I addressed one aspect of mixed marriage. It was my honor at that time to recognize the presence of the many non-Jews in our congregation who devote themselves to our mission as a synagogue.

As I said on Yom Kippur, "It is important for the congregation to recognize how much non-Jews bring to us. It is important for those of us who are Jewish not to take your participation in Sinai for granted... Just in case, we haven't been clear, today I am pleased to say - Thank you. Your love is part of the tapestry that makes our congregation holy."

Little did I anticipate, how positively the congregation would respond to my words. Those of you who are married to non-Jews were touched. Non-Jews were exhilarated and proud. People whose children are married to non-Jews told me that they were going to send the sermon to their children.

Others commented how the sermon reflected a new world. For the truth is that 20 years ago, it would never have occurred to any of us that we might need to or want to speak as I did about mixed marriages in the community. The demography was different then. None of us knew what was developing or how our perception and reaction to mixed marriage would change. We could not have realized that non-Jews would become so involved in so many ways in building the Jewish future. We could not have understood how close to normative mixed marriage would become.

Except mixed marriage is really not quite par for the course. That is why some congregants shared their conviction with me that, although we want to be welcoming and inclusive, Judaism is more likely to be assured when a Jew does marry a Jew. Of course, I did not discuss that on Yom Kippur because Jewish marriage was not my topic. But I would be disingenuous if I did not say I agree with the preference many congregants have for Jewish/Jewish marriage. Endogamy (Jews marrying Jews) remains for the Reform movement and most Jews across the Jewish world the understood path towards the Jewish future. That, in fact, is one primary reason I have only officiated at marriages between Jews in all my years as a rabbi. This position had absolutely nothing to do with my personal feelings towards the Jews I knew who may have married non-Jews. As a person, as a human being, I was always pleased to learn that another human being (in this case a Jewish one) had found a life partner. As Mark Shapiro, I wished a Jewish young man or woman happiness and fulfillment in their forthcoming marriage.

I could not officiate at the wedding, however, because I believed that as a rabbi I did not have a role to play in the marriage of a Jew and a non-Jew. I had no role to play for three reasons.

1. If being ordained as a rabbi meant that I was now charged with being a guarantor of Jewish survival, I could not see the marriage of a Jew to a non-Jew accomplishing that goal. I was able to do weddings not primarily as a functionary of the state. That is what a justice of the peace does. I was only able to do weddings because Jewish tradition empowered me as a rabbi to perform a Jewish ceremony for Jews.

2. I believed that my not participating in mixed marriages made a symbolic statement to future couples and the larger community that "in-marriage" was the Jewish path to be chosen.

3. I believed that the ceremony I performed as a rabbi assumed two Jews were standing before me. It was a Jewish ceremony suffused with Jewish symbols, history, language and values that only made sense if both marriage partners lived and believed the ceremony. I have said to many

couples, "I respect your desire to have a rabbi at your wedding, but out of respect for you, I think it is inappropriate to force one of you to pretend to be a Jew for the five minutes under the chupa. If we take each other seriously and if we take the ceremony's words and symbols seriously, it just doesn't make sense for a non-Jew to be part of a Jewish wedding."

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But what if a couple were to come to me and say the following, "Rabbi, we are in love. One of us is Jewish; the other is not. But the non-Jew is not practicing another religion and together we are committed to creating a Jewish home. If we have children, we will raise them exclusively as Jews. Even before that, however, we want to make our home Jewish. We are willing to study and learn something more about Judaism. The one who is not Jewish cannot convert to Judaism now. The one of us who is Jewish may not have engaged Judaism very much as an adult, but if you will help us Rabbi, we would still like to work towards some kind of Jewish home that will reflect us honestly. Will you work with us? If we commit to a Jewish future, will you also officiate at our wedding?"

Well... here is... the... news... from me...

My answer starting this month to a couple like this one would be, "Yes, let's talk. And if you are true to your word about learning and then giving yourselves an address in the Jewish world, I will officiate at your wedding."

Notwithstanding what I have just said, this is my formal statement to Sinai that I am willing to experiment with a new position on officiating at mixed marriages. During the next year, on an experimental basis, I am willing to officiate at some mixed marriages with the following understandings.

1. I think I can officiate at some mixed marriages as a rabbi and work for Jewish survival if I broaden my definition of what I am doing. I believe, for example, that unlike Christianity, for Judaism, it is the family - the household - that is the molecule, the smallest element that carries the identity of the whole. I also certainly believe that a Jewish household can encompass a non-Jew. On that basis, then, I could officiate at the wedding of a Jew and a non-Jew if together they saw their wedding as the beginning of Jewish home. This would require a commitment from the couple to me as to their plans. (I envision our working together for at least 6 to 12 months before the wedding.) It would also require trust from me since we would be talking about events that would unfold over many years after the wedding ceremony. This would also mean that I would only do marriages of this sort for people I already know. In other words, the Jewish partner would have to be a member of Sinai or the child of a member.

2. When it comes to the ceremony that I might perform for mixed marriages, I think you can see that the presence of a couple where one partner is not Jewish will require a unique and thoughtful response. If words and symbols have real meaning, I won't be able to say and do precisely

what I have done for other weddings under the chupa. The truth is that I haven't yet figured out how to adapt the wedding ceremony I know and love. This will take some time and much consideration. It will be a Jewish ceremony, but it will be different.

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So what comes next? I have a few thoughts about next steps.

1. I hope you will read this article a second time in order to be sure that you understand what I intend and that I have been as clear as I should have been.

2. I hope you will share this article with your children or with family members for whom my words may be of particular significance.

3. Finally, I hope you will also remember the larger message I shared with you on Yom Kippur morning 2006\*. At that time, I talked about our Mission Statement and focused on the ways in which Sinai must always remain a "welcoming and inclusive Reform congregation." I spoke about our embracing couples in the congregation who are mixed married, about our embracing those in the congregation who have converted to Judaism, and, needless to say, I intended to honor and embrace those many households where Jews are married to other Jews either by birth or by choice.

Having spoken about our desire to create an open and joyful community, however, I also went on to refer to the other part of our Mission Statement that describes Sinai as a congregation "where our members pursue a continuing journey of Jewish growth... We encourage participation in prayer, life-long Jewish learning, and social justice..."

I referred to this second part of the Mission Statement to underscore what Sinai ultimately represents. Once we are all inside the doors, our goal does remain Jewish growth. Not all of us will come to this place via the same route, but once we are here, I do envision us traveling a very similar path. We are here to grow as a Jewish community and to work towards the flourishing of the Tree of Jewish Life.

Even as I may change and we all change, our fundamental focus does not waver. We remain committed to grasping the Tree of Life and holding it fast for generations to come. I welcome your thoughts.

I welcome your responses. I look forward to continuing our journey of Jewish growth in the months ahead.

*\*The 2006 Yom Kippur message can be found [here](#) on the Sinai website. Under Rabbi Emeritus, follow the LINK that takes you to past SERMONS.*