

*Congregation
Shalom*

Rabbi Ronald Shapiro
November 20, 2003

Dear Congregant,

I am writing to you to let you know about a decision I have made pertaining to my officiating at marriage ceremonies between Jewish and non-Jewish congregants. This letter is indicative of my own opinion on this issue. As you may know, the Wisconsin Council of Rabbis had traditionally prohibited Milwaukee rabbis from officiating at such ceremonies. That decision was modified somewhat a few years ago. Yet, the reality remains that Milwaukee rabbis still do not officiate at ceremonies between Jewish and non-Jewish people. During these past twenty-five years, I have honored the position of the Wisconsin Council of Rabbis out of respect for my colleagues, out of sensitivity to K'lal Yisrael - the unity of the Jewish people, and out of my own concerns about the continuity of Jewish life and survival. In that period of time though, I was concerned that this decision would alienate, disenfranchise, and create an irreparable breach. I have, therefore participated in these marriage ceremonies but not been the officiant.

However, a number of variables have changed, including my own perspective on this matter, and I intend to officiate at a wedding ceremony between a Jewish and non-Jewish person under specific circumstances. Primarily, this decision is being made due to the significant number of couples who have made a commitment to raise their children as Jewish and maintain a Jewish home, despite the fact that one partner in the relationship is not Jewish. Secondly, the pain that had been created in the past, by the refusal - particularly in these instances - is intense, long lasting and counter-productive if we seek to "keep the door of Judaism and to the community wide open".

For me, the Reform movement's commitment to welcome non-Jewish people into our community through the outreach program and the acknowledgement that a person is Jewish if raised in a Jewish household whether the mother or father is Jewish is pivotal. Non-officiation for such relationships is, in my estimation, out of sync with the direction that liberal Judaism has set forth. We have created a certain nebulous atmosphere by beckoning with one hand and pushing away with the other.

I apologize to those people who in the past have been refused rabbinic officiation as well as those of you who may differ with this new position I hold. I respect your religious sensitivities in both areas and hope you don't feel I am trampling upon your religious ideologies. However, the refusal of rabbis to officiate has not stemmed the tide of mixed marriage. On the contrary, the percentage of mixed marriage is on the dramatic increase. I feel that due to the aforementioned issues, as well as, the dramatic growth of mixed marriages, and the sincere quest to maintain Jewish homes and families by these couples, it behooves us to do what we can to welcome them in a loving non-judgmental manner.

Therefore, I wish to officiate at these inter-faith weddings, using the following parameters:

- 1) The couple has agreed in harmony and respect to maintain a Jewish home, raise their children within the Jewish faith and the Jewish faith alone.
- 2) The couple agrees to identify and support Congregation Shalom if they reside in Milwaukee or another Reform congregation if they reside in another city.
- 3) The couple or their parents must have been and continue to be members of Congregation Shalom in accordance with its policies. In some situations, the relationship among the Jewish partner, the synagogue, and me is a dynamic component.
- 4) The couples will meet with me for pre-marital discussion and instruction on creating a Jewish home and basic Judaism.
- 5) I would be the only clergy officiant, Jewish or non-Jewish at this ceremony. I would assume the responsibility of creating a religious ceremony that is an appropriate expression of the couple's religious convictions, yet harmonizes with aspects of Jewish custom and faith.
- 6) In the event that these aforementioned principles cannot be met, I will continue to participate in these ceremonies in the same manner I have followed in the past.

In reality, I believe this bold step is long over due and I pray that not only will it enhance Jewish practice within our community, but also it will send an important message of inclusiveness, which we philosophically articulate. I welcome your comments and would be happy to hear from you.

As the holiday of Hanukah approaches, we recall that its message of enlightenment and rededication might inspire us to be a source of light and warmth to those in our midst who reach out to us for acceptance and blessing ... and may we re-dedicate ourselves to Isaiah the Prophet's admonition: "My House shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples". (Isaiah 56:7) May our vision be that our house of prayer be one that invites "those who are near" and those who we seek to bring near to our hearts. Thank you for considering my thoughts on this matter, and may you be blessed with a healthy and joyous Hanukah.

With respect and Shalom,

Rabbi Ronald M. Shapiro